I AM AN ARTIST, AN ANTI-ARTIST,
NO SHRINKING EGO, MODEST,
A FEMINIST, A PROFOUND MISOGYNIST,
A ROMANTIC, A REALIST, A SURREALIST,
A FUNK ARTIST, CONCEPTUAL ARTIST,
MINIMALIST, POSTMODERNIST,
BEATNIK, HIPPIE, PUNK,
SUBTLE, CONFRONTATIONAL,
BELIEVABLE, PARANOIAC,
COURTEOUS, DIFFICULT, FORTHRIGHT,
IMPOSSIBLE TO WORK WITH,
ACCESSIBLE, OBSCURE, PRECISE, CALM,
CONTRARY, ELUSIVE, SPIRITUAL, PROFANE,
A RENAISSANCE MAN OF CONTEMPORARY ART
AND ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT
ARTISTS IN THE WORLD.

MY WORK IS DESCRIBED AS
BEAUTIFUL, HORRIBLE,
HOGWASH, GENIUS,
MAUNDERING, PRECISE, QUAINT,
AVANT-GARDE, HISTORICAL,
HACKNEYED, MASTERFUL, TRIVIAL,
INTENSE, MYSTICAL, VIRTUOSIC,
BEWILDERING, ABSORBING, CONCISE,
ABSURD, AMUSING, INNOVATIVE,
NOSTALGIC, CONTEMPORARY,
ICONOCLASTIC, SOPHISTICATED,
TRASH, MASTERPIECES, ETC.
IT’S ALL TRUE.

Bruce Conner in a letter to Paula Kirkeby, 2000

BRUCE CONNER

IT'S BRUCE CONNER ALL TRUE

Edited by Rudolf Frieling and Gary Garrels

SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART *in association with* UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

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DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

Neal Benezra, Helen and Charles Schwab Director, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

The late Bruce Conner was intriguingly difficult to pin down. Assemblage artist, draftsman, performer, photographer, experimental filmmaker: he was all of these. Scavenger of junk from the streets, meticulous composer of intricate inkblots: these too. An artwork can look like this today, and tomorrow look like that. Throughout his fifty-year career, Conner's restless invention ranged across mediums, embraced the cross-pollination of genres and styles, and welcomed change in endless forms. The creative outposts he established along the way, dating from the late 1950s through the last year of his life, 2008, have influenced generations of artists, and his work continues to resonate strongly today.

Conner moved to San Francisco from the Midwest in 1957 and, after short stints in Mexico and elsewhere in the United States in the early 1960s, lived in this city for the rest of his life. He was a vital presence in the Bay Area art scene and over the years at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Not only was his work shown at SFMOMA in numerous group and solo presentations and acquired for our collection, but our curators, conservators, and educators were fortunate to engage in an extended and extensive dialogue with him. He even worked at our museum, briefly, preparing works for exhibition and installing shows, soon after arriving on the West Coast.

At this pivotal moment in our history, as SFMOMA opens following an expansive transformation and with a renewed focus on the terrifically rich and diverse history of art making in California, we are pleased beyond measure that the first major touring exhibition we have organized, and will present in our expanded building, is a complete retrospective of the work of this seminal Bay Area artist: Bruce Conner.

We are extremely grateful to the artist's wife, Jean Conner, and the Conner Family Trust, for their generosity and gracious collaboration throughout the organization of this exhibition. This ambitious project—representing the full breadth and reach of Bruce Conner's wide-ranging creativity—would not have been possible without their guidance and support.

This extraordinary gathering of works by Conner is the result of the exceptional insight, thoughtfulness, and efforts of the exhibition's four co-curators: Stuart Comer, Chief Curator, Department of Media and Performance Art, and Laura Hoptman, Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York; and Rudolf Frieling, Curator of Media Arts, and Gary Garrels, Elise S. Haas Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA); with Rachel Federman, former Assistant Curator, Painting and Sculpture, SFMOMA. Capturing the complexity of Conner's endeavors over the five decades of his career is no small feat, and we extend our deep thanks to them for the new understanding this exhibition and publication offer us all.

Though Conner was based in San Francisco for most of his life, he found early support in New York and Europe, and so it is fitting that this first full retrospective of his work premieres at MoMA, and following its presentation in the Bay Area will travel to the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. We offer our sincere appreciation to our colleagues at these institutions, led by Glenn D. Lowry, director, MoMA, and Manuel Borja-Villel, director, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, for their enthusiastic collaboration. We are thrilled that this exhibition will reach such a wide audience, especially now, when the profound impact of Conner's groundbreaking creative achievements is gaining the broad recognition it so well deserves.

We are deeply grateful for the generous support of the Henry Luce Foundation, the major organizing sponsor of the exhibition. We also thank Kodak for their in-kind support, which has enabled Conner's films to be presented as film prints in the screening theaters and galleries of the exhibition's three venues.

"Don't just think of me as some little well you know CONNERMANIAC," John Lennon wrote in a fan letter to Conner in 1967. Experiencing the rich, spare, dark, vibrant, all-embracing, always new, iterative, unpredictable, spiritual, challenging, playful bodies of work that make up Conner's lifetime of exploration, who could blame him? As this exhibition and publication make abundantly clear, Bruce Conner's achievements merit our close attention—and maybe even our mania.

INTRODUCTION

Stuart Comer, Rudolf Frieling, Gary Garrels, and Laura Hoptman

The idea of organizing a Bruce Conner retrospective first arose on the heels of the premiere of his THREE SCREEN RAY at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) in 2010. The more we talked to colleagues, friends, collectors, and collaborators of Conner, the more we realized the timeliness of our proposal. The only large survey of Conner's work to date, *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II,* appropriately referred to as a "non-retrospective" by the living artist, had been organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis more than a decade earlier, in 1999, and traveled just to the West Coast and Texas. Conner was involved in all aspects of the exhibition, which he envisioned as one in a series of surveys (parts I through VII), with the goal of showing it "all" eventually. In the years leading up to 1999, he played with a number of organizing themes that were disparate, parallel, or at odds with each other, including a "theater of sex and violence in assemblage" and a "quit the art business story."[1] At that time, the "story" being told was Conner's perspective. Today, in his absence, we have turned to Jean Conner, his widow, along with Robert Conway and Michelle Silva of the Conner Family Trust, our three core collaborators, whose deep knowledge of Conner and his work has been supplemented by the reminiscences of his many friends, artistic partners, gallerists, and collectors. This exhibition includes stories Conner himself didn't tell.

Conner was revered by many during his lifetime, but at times he seemed to be categorized and marginalized either as a representative of a Bay Area counterculture or as an avant-garde filmmaker. As a result, his work did not play a central role in most narratives of contemporary art in the twentieth century. This has recently begun to change profoundly. Over the past decade the lens of the art world has shifted to focus on figures who have emerged as inspirations for today's artists due to their production of hybrid forms of art that defy expectations and constraints of genre. An urgent reconsideration of artists who have been overlooked or underappreciated in the classic art historical narrative has led to far more widespread recognition of Conner's artistic achievements. It has also paved the way for this retrospective.

Yet Conner's timeliness today might actually be the result of his untimeliness throughout his career. Never considering himself a proponent of Beat culture or Pop art or whatever artistic movements held public and critical attention at any particular moment, he managed to be a contemporary as Giorgio Agamben understands the term: "The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness."[2] In seeking out light through the archaeological gesture of mining nineteenth-century prints, in his mixing of archaic and modern iconographies, by appropriating Hollywood movies and discarded commercial forms of moving pictures, Conner set himself apart from the currents of contemporary art. This distance from the promises of each era's present moment constitutes the core of Conner's work. In Diedrich Diederichsen's words in this volume, he was "a psychedelic and a realist in equal measure."[3]

In addition, his engagement with the materiality and language of both collage and film offers a historical example of the ongoing artistic pursuit to critically and playfully counter the consumer-driven society of the spectacle. Often mistakenly dubbed the father of the music video, Conner is nonetheless a towering point of reference because of his meticulous but also irreverent probing of mainstream culture. The grotesque and even funny aspects of his work resonate with the digital remixes and mashups of the twenty-first century.

Exemplifying the fluidity that is now a hallmark of contemporary art, Conner worked simultaneously or sequentially in a range of mediums and often created hybrids of painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking, film, and performance. He was an early practitioner of found-object assemblage, and his reliefs and freestanding sculptural objects were widely recognized almost immediately for their masterful compositions and their daringly dark subject matter. See, for example, the beautiful but disquieting assemblage BLACK DAHLIA (1960, pl. 48), so intensely evoked by Greil Marcus in this volume.

Conner was also a pioneer of experimental filmmaking. Incorporating found footage from a wide variety of sources—from trailers and training films to newsreels—and adding his own footage, he developed a quick-cut method of editing and focused on disturbing, current subjects. Often politically pointed, his films touch on issues of violence in American culture, the objectification of the female body, and nuclear holocaust. Because of their structural innovation and provocative subject matter, films like A MOVIE (1958, pl. 9), REPORT (1963–67, pl. 84), and CROSSROADS (1976, pl. 125) have become landmarks of American avant-garde film.

Parallel or in counterpoint to his filmmaking activities, Conner engaged in almost constant production of carefully crafted works on paper, utilizing drawing, collage, and later a method of inkblot drawing using scored paper. He also created two important photographic bodies of work—a haunting group of life-size black-and-white photographs from the mid-1970s that he called ANGELS (pls. 126–33 and 255), and an extended series of photographs and photographic collages between the 1970s and 1990s capturing the spirit of the Punk era (pls. 168–69 and 171–78).

For our curatorial team, it was an immense pleasure to absorb and explore the masterful craftsmanship and often fantastic richness of detail in Conner's art, but also to discover its openness. Delving into the abysses of drawings or multiple versions of film cuts, we found a readiness to embrace change over time in many of his works and witnessed the multiple and often conflicting dimensions of his character. His attitudes were humorous as much as they were provocative, and he sometimes placed himself directly into his work as a great performer.

This exhibition is the first comprehensive retrospective of Conner's art, bringing together more than 250 objects encompassing film, video, painting, assemblage, sculpture, drawings, engraving collages, prints, photography, photograms, tapestries, performance, and conceptual works. We were tasked with responding to the artist's unceasing creative output over five decades, and although ambitious in scope, the exhibition necessarily condenses and presents a careful selection of many significant bodies of work. Organized loosely both chronologically and thematically, it emphasizes Conner's polymorphic abilities. We were guided by the belief that his work must be considered as a whole, not as the distinct and separate products of a visual artist and an avant-garde filmmaker. For this reason, we have situated some of his most significant films within the central axis of the exhibition, and explore an entire grammar of displaying moving images, from analog celluloid to digital projections—a path the artist himself chose toward the end of his life.

Key loans have helped us assemble a presentation that includes both his most seminal works and more obscure and rarely seen objects, such as his paintings from the 1950s. Works that have had a notoriously challenging exhibition history or have rarely been shown, such as the restored assemblages CHILD (1959, pl. 50) and TICK-TOCK JELLY CLOCK COSMOTRON (1961, pl. 56), are being presented here for the first time in decades. In addition, this exhibition features bodies of works that were not part of his 1999 survey, including his punk photographs from the 1970s and works that Conner made in the last years of his life, after he officially "retired" as an artist, including those by his close "collaborators" Anonymous, Anonymouse, and Emily Feather, among others. Conner often revisited his past work, reviewing, reformatting, and distilling older materials—as in his punk collages of the 1990s, in which he reworked his earlier photographs, and his remixing of film material from the 1960s into digital formats—and these later works can now be seen within the continuum of his entire career. Significantly, in the last five years of his life, Conner also expanded the scope of his films by creating large-scale multichannel installations such as the late masterpiece THREE SCREEN RAY (2006, pl. 252). He digitally projected his last work in moving images, EASTER MORNING (2008, pl. 256), in the world of art fairs, a commercial success he hadn't had for the entirety of his career.

This exhibition and accompanying catalogue, with its diverse and at times even conflicting narratives, called for a title that could convey a deeply felt sense of Conner's passionate strategies, retreats, and reconsiderations, a title that would go beyond the specifics of a single image or idea. Serendipitously, we found what we were looking for in a letter by the artist to a longtime associate and one of his gallerists, Paula Kirkeby, on the heels of the Walker survey, which culminated in a long list of seemingly contradictory characterizations expressed by the media:

> I am an artist, an anti-artist, no shrinking ego, modest, a feminist, a profound misogynist, a romantic, a realist, a surrealist, a funk artist, conceptual artist, minimalist, postmodernist, beatnik, hippie, punk, subtle, confrontational, believable, paranoiac, courteous, difficult, forthright, impossible to work with, accessible, obscure, precise, calm, contrary, elusive, spiritual, profane, a Renaissance man of contemporary art and one of the most important artists in the world. My work is described as beautiful, horrible, hogwash, genius, maundering, precise, quaint, avant-garde, historical, hackneyed, masterful, trivial, intense, mystical, virtuosic, bewildering, absorbing, concise, absurd, amusing, innovative, nostalgic, contemporary, iconoclastic, sophisticated, trash, masterpieces, etc. It's all true.[4]

1 Bruce Conner, typewritten concept, Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (BCP); see Rachel Federman, "Bruce Conner: Fifty Years in Show Business—A Narrative Chronology," in this volume.

2 Giorgio Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?" in Agamben, *"What Is an Apparatus?" and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 44.

3 See Diedrich Diederichsen, "Psychedelic/Realist: Bruce Conner and Music," in this volume.

4 Bruce Conner, letter to Paula Kirkeby, Nov. 18, 2000, BCP.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Rudolf Frieling and Gary Garrels

A project of this scale and complexity could not have been accomplished without a commensurately large and talented network of support. We must first thank our co-curators at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, Stuart Comer and Laura Hoptman, for contributing their expertise, perspectives, and scholarship to this undertaking. Jean Conner, Robert Conway, and Michelle Silva of the Conner Family Trust have provided invaluable resources and insights at every stage in the development of the project. We are immeasurably grateful for the Trust's involvement and support of this endeavor.

Our colleagues at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) embraced this project with extraordinary enthusiasm and professionalism even as the museum was preparing to open in its newly expanded building. Neal Benezra understood the significance and timeliness of a Bruce Conner retrospective and provided immediate and unwavering support. Rachel Federman's dedication and extensive knowledge of Conner's career made her an invaluable resource during each stage of the project. Nancy Lim adeptly stepped in to assist in the final stages of preparing the tour. Michelle Barger committed herself to understanding the artist's complicated and variable approach to materials. Olga Charyshyn and Heather McNally of our registration team managed this uncommonly complicated project with exceptional skill and grace. Emily Lewis and David Funk deftly managed the logistics of the exhibition tour. Steve Dye, Brandon Larson, and Kent Roberts were more than up to the task of the technically complex installation at SFMOMA. Additional assistance was provided by numerous staff members across the institution, including Janet Alberti, Ruth Berson, and Nan Keeton; Edith Cohen, Alison Dubois, Amanda Hunter Johnson, Margaret Kendrick, Doug Kerr, Sriba Kwadjovie, Marla Misunas, Peggy Tran-Le, and the Photo Studio team in Collections; Sarah Bailey Hogarty, Chad Coerver, Amanda Glesmann, Claudia La Rocco, Stephanie Pau, and Jennifer Sonderby in Content Strategy and Digital Engagement; Anne Bast Davis, Craig Corpora, and Jared Ledesma in Curatorial; Rehana Abbas, Richard Havens, Samantha Leo, Caroline Stevens, Elizabeth Waller, and Misty Youmans in Development; Megan Brian, Gina Basso, Deena Chalabi, Julie Charles, Frank Smigiel, and Dominic Willsdon in Education and Public Practice; Alexander Cheves, Sarah Choi, and John Davis in Exhibitions; Clara Hatcher, Wynter Martinez, and Jennifer Northrop in Marketing and Communications; and Jana Machin and Tobey Martin of the Museum Store. We are grateful for the contributions of interns Elise Herrala and Jessica Yee and volunteer Peter Danbury. The Conner Family Trust thanks Libby McCoy for her preparation and management of its loans to the exhibition.

At MoMA, we extend our sincere thanks to Glenn D. Lowry and Ann Temkin for supporting the idea of this exhibition from the outset, and to Kathy Halbreich, whose enthusiasm for this project reflects her experience overseeing the last major survey of Conner's work, presented at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis seventeen years ago. We acknowledge with gratitude the entire curatorial team, including Giampaolo Bianconi and Akili Tommasino, who contributed their expertise to all aspects of the exhibition, publication, and public programs. Kelsey Knutson was instrumental to the curatorial team's endeavors. In the Department of Conservation, we thank Jim Coddington and are especially grateful to Roger Griffith and Megan Randall, who undertook an astonishing restoration of CHILD (1959, pl. 50), a work in MoMA's collection. Roger Griffith also organized a compelling and productive conservation study day focused on this work for conservators and curators from both institutions in May 2015. Lana Hum provided a brilliant design for the exhibition in New York, and the complex film and video installations would not have been possible without the expertise of Aaron Louis, Aaron Harrow, and Mike Gibbons in the Audio Visual Department. We extend additional thanks to Eva Bochem-Shur, Claire Corey, and Tony Lee in the Department of Graphic Design and Advertising; Rajendra Roy, Josh Siegel, Anne Morra, Katie Trainor, Ashley Swinnerton, and Sean Egan in the Department of Film; Peter Oleksik and Kate Lewis in the Department of Conservation; Christophe Cherix, David Platzker, Kathleen S. Curry, and Emily Cushman in the Department of Drawings and Prints; Ramona Bannayan in the Department of Exhibitions and Collections; Rachel Kim and Randolph Black in the Department of Exhibition Planning and Administration; Jennifer Wolfe, Rob Jung, Sarah Wood, and Tom Krueger in the Department of Collection Management and Exhibition Registration; Margaret Doyle, Paul Jackson, and Kim Mitchell in the Department of Communications; Wendy Woon, Sara Bodinson, Jenna Madison, Pablo Helguera, Sarah Kennedy, and Jess Van Nostrand in the Department of Education; Charles Kim and Maria Marchenkova in the Department of Publications; the security staff, led by Tunji Adeniji and Daniel Platt; Sonya Shirier in the Department of Visitor Services; Todd Bishop, Maggie Lyko, and Jessica Smith in the Department of External Affairs; Kathryn Ryan and Allison LaPlatney in the Department of Collection and Exhibition Technologies; Karen Hernandez and Emily Greer in the Department of Retail; Milan Hughston, Jennifer Tobias, and David Senior in the MoMA library; the Frameshop team, led by Pedro Perez; Melanie Monios and Pam Duncan in the Department of Special Programming and Events; Harry Harris in the Department of Exhibition Design and Production; and interns Anne-Claire Morel, J. English Cook, and Genevieve Lipinsky de Orlov.

Our colleagues at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid embraced this project with admirable enthusiasm. It is deeply gratifying to see the exhibition travel internationally to such an august institution, and the catalogue produced in a Spanish-language edition so that new audiences will become familiar with Conner's work. We would like to thank Manuel Borja-Villel and João Fernandes for their early enthusiasm and dedication.

This volume not only represents the first comprehensive publication devoted to Conner's entire career; it expands substantially the range of perspectives on his work. With a pronounced interest in addressing unique artworks, new materials, and

fresh narratives, we invited a number of the publication's contributors—Diedrich Diederichsen, Johanna Gosse, Kellie Jones, and Greil Marcus—to focus on outstanding individual objects or groups of works. Our conservation colleagues Michelle Barger at SFMOMA and Roger Griffith and Megan Randall at MoMA draw attention to the issues of preservation and restoration of Conner's work. Personal accounts from many of his former friends and collaborators—including Stan Brakhage, David Byrne, Michael McClure, Henry S. Rosenthal, Dean Smith, and Kristine Stiles—weave a second layer of narratives and viewpoints. Their specific and often very personal encounters with Conner's creative and collaborative process are coupled with contemporary perspectives by artists Kevin Beasley, Carol Bove, Dara Birnbaum, and Christian Marclay as well as an original artistic homage by the artist collective and Conner aficionados Will Brown. Our own essays and those of our curatorial colleagues take a thematic approach to consider various aspects of the artist's career beyond the traditional limits of genre. Rachel Federman has additionally contributed an extensive biographical and visual chronology.[1]

We hope that the catalogue that you hold in your hands communicates our passion for this undertaking, and that it will serve as a resource for generations of Conner scholars and fans. We were thrilled by the enthusiasm of the publication's contributors and thank them profusely for the insights they offer into the artist's work. The beautiful design by James Williams encapsulates our wish that this volume be authoritative, but also discursive—a reflection of the artist's multiplicity. We are deeply grateful for the tireless efforts and astuteness of SFMOMA's publications team, including Kari Dahlgren, Jennifer Knox White, and Christopher Lura. We are also grateful to University of California Press for their enthusiastic support of the book, and especially to Karen Levine, Nadine Little, Kim Robinson, and Jack Young. We thank our MoMA collaborators Giampaolo Bianconi and Akili Tommasino for compiling the extensive bibliography and exhibition history at the back of this volume. Additional research was provided by Elise Herrala and by intern Brianna Toth at the Conner Family Trust.

We have relied on a number of archival resources in our research for this exhibition and publication, none more valuable than the Bruce Conner Papers at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, which were organized by Conner's former assistant Dean Smith. Another crucial resource was the Walker Art Center Archives, which provided access to documents from its foundational 1999 exhibition *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II,* curated by Peter Boswell, Bruce Jenkins, and Joan Rothfuss. Additional thanks are owed to Jeff Gunderson at the San Francisco Art Institute. Many of Conner's former collaborators, dealers, and friends shared their memories with us during formal and informal conversations, including Toni Basil, Gwen Bitz, Peter Boswell, Kay Bradner, Kathan Brown, Ernie Burden, Gary B. Carson, Robert Dean, Frank English, Steven Fama, Tamara Freedman, Thomas Garver, Ed Gilbert, Patrick Gleeson, Rachel Homer, Susan Homer, Susan Inglett, Bruce Jenkins, Paula Kirkeby, Michael Kohn, Vivian Kurz, Constance Lewallen, Michael McClure, Mary Miller, Geoff Muldaur, Natasha Nicholson, Henry Rosenthal, Joan Rothfuss, Peter Selz, Robert Harshorn Shimshak, Michelle Silva, Dean Smith, Kristine Stiles, Tom Thompson, and James Willis. Conner's current and former dealers—Paule Anglim Gallery (now Anglim Gilbert Gallery) in San Francisco; Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles; Paula Cooper Gallery in New York; Susan Inglett Gallery in New York; Curt Marcus Gallery in New York; Senior & Shopmaker Gallery in New York; and Paula Z. Kirkeby Contemporary Fine Art (now Smith Andersen Editions) in Palo Alto—have been instrumental in helping us locate key works, as has Sara Friedlander at Christie's.

We thank the Henry Luce Foundation for its early major sponsorship of the exhibition and catalogue. The Foundation's generosity supported research ensuring the project's contribution to scholarship on this groundbreaking American artist. Special thanks are due to our partners at Kodak, Sascha Rice, who acted as our chief liaison, and, most importantly, CEO Jeff Clarke and his wife, Suzette Clarke. Their support guaranteed that we could honor Conner's legacy in film in the best way possible by preserving the long tradition of film as film, and enabled Michelle Silva's team, including Ross Lipman and Timoleon Wilkins, to prepare the appropriate formats for all exhibition and screening copies. In collaboration with the Conner Family Trust and Kohn Gallery, the film and digital restoration was masterfully produced with a team of experts at FotoKem, Cinema Arts, and UCLA Film & Television Archive; sound restoration was realized by Audio Mechanics and optical tracks by Gibbs Chapman.

Finally, we extend our appreciation to the lenders, both institutions and individuals, for their incredible graciousness and cooperation. In all instances—and especially where fragile assemblage works are involved—we have been inspired by their dedication to this project and to the artist. It has been an incredible experience to work with so many extraordinary colleagues—directors, curators, conservators, registrars, preparators, librarians, and archivists, among others—at the numerous museum and institutional collections that facilitated research and loans of Conner works. We were greeted with exceptional goodwill and support at every stage of developing this exhibition and publication. We thank you with enormous gratitude for your assistance.

1 All contributions were newly commissioned for this volume, with the exception of the lecture by Stan Brakhage and poems by Michael McClure.

PLATES

"Etc.": Some Notes to the Reader

In keeping with Bruce Conner's clearly articulated wish, the titles of his works are given in all capital letters without italics. In a typed statement found among his papers at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, he explained: "Full Capital Letters (without punctuation mark such as a period at the end) are like signage on walls, monuments, objects and are like objects in themselves. . . . They have an architectural structure. Similar to newspaper headlines, true titles, imperative or directive phrasing, such as HELP, STOP, FREE: TAKE ONE."

On November 1, 1998, during the planning of his survey exhibition *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II,* Conner wrote to Walker Art Center curator Joan Rothfuss in Minneapolis regarding the checklist: "I have looked at photos of some of the collages and assemblages and listed what I can see and remember from each. Perhaps other information will occur to add to the mixed media before we finish. I am sure that I did not list everything on several of the works. My lists should probably be conditioned with etc. at the end." Conner's request was honored and "etc." was appended to the medium descriptions of mixed-media collages and assemblages in the exhibition's catalogue. This concession to practicality seems uncharacteristic of the exacting Conner, but is in fact consistent with his approach to these works, which he viewed as dynamic and changeable (by him). The same work might appear differently from one image to the next, with objects having been rearranged, added, or taken away. Time itself is an agent of change for these uncommonly fragile works. In fact, "etc." was included even in catalogue entries for his first major museum exhibition, at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University in 1965.

The mediums of works that appear here, while omitting "etc.," derive from a variety of sources: Conner's records, which have been faithfully cataloged by the Conner Family Trust; publications, notably the Walker Art Center book referenced above; private lenders and lending institutions, many of whom have generously shared their conservation notes or pulled works out of storage; observation from photographs; and, whenever possible, direct examination of works by the exhibition's curators, conservators, and registrars. The results are as varied as the sources, and while we have aimed to be as comprehensive as possible—naming found objects, for example, rather than designating them with generic descriptors such as "metal" or "plastic"—perceptive viewers may discover some items have been omitted or objects are called by names that differ from ones they might have chosen. Readers familiar with the artist's work might recall too that Conner used the term "engraving collage" to describe the collages he assembled primarily from nineteenth-century steel and wood engravings. However, the artist acknowledged that his source material also included engravings "reproduced at a later date by photo offset."[1] In consultation with the Conner Family Trust, we have therefore substituted "collage of found illustrations" in place of "engraving collage."

The plates that follow are arranged roughly by medium and chronology, but also reflect thematic groupings; assemblages that focus on female sexuality are one such example.

1 "A Conversation with Bruce Conner and Robert Dean" (April 27, 1990), in *Bruce Conner: Assemblages, Paintings, Drawings, Engraving Collages, 1960–1990* (Santa Monica: Michael Kohn Gallery, 1990), n.p.





1 **UNTITLED** (front and back) 1954–61 Cut and pasted papers, cardboard, wood, nails, paint, staples, metal, tar, feathers, and plastic on Masonite
63⅞ × 49⅝ × 4⅛ in. (162.2 × 126.1 × 10.5 cm)
Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 1992

Rachel Federman

BRUCE CONNER: FIFTY YEARS IN SHOW BUSINESS—A NARRATIVE CHRONOLOGY

The artist has his role in our society that the madman had, that the fool had, that the prophet had . . . he's a protected fool. The fool with his bells says foolish, stupid things, but every once in a while he also comes out with the truth. It's a very dangerous job to be the fool. He's got to eat at the king's table and be part of the process. The king really wants him around because all the other people (who are real fools) wouldn't say what they really meant.

. . .

Perhaps, to start, we could deal with the themes and stories to wrap the retrospective around. The story of individual films, the sequence of sculptures from the ivory tower, the DO NOT TOUCH story, the Ratbastard Protective Association, the brick mailed to Terry Riley, the LOVE painted on the street story, the theater of sex and violence story in assemblage, the event, environment, etc. Name of the artist story, quit the art business story, stopped gluing it down story, the SUPERHUMAN DEVOTION story, the Bruce Conner Story.

—Bruce Conner

. . .

On December 5, 2004, Bruce Conner threw himself a party. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported in its social column: "Artist Bruce Conner gathered friends, dealers, supporters, and people with whom he's worked and took over the Hayes Street Grill for a '50 Years in Show Business' party Sunday night. Conner had opened the first art gallery in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1954 (which lasted, he said, for only three months), and had intended to have fifty guests, including pals from Wichita, Kansas, his hometown. Only forty-eight attended, he said. He's a very exact kind of guy."[1]

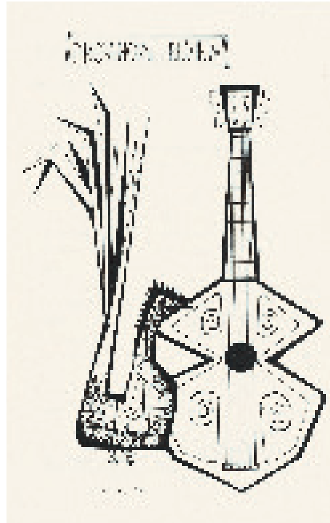
Conner's self-identified "show-biz" debut, which had taken place when the artist was an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, was an audacious, if inauspicious, start to a long and prolific life in art (fig. 1). Among the artists who exhibited at the Gallery, as it

Epigraphs: Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Paul Karlstrom, Aug. 12, 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., and letter from Bruce Conner to Henry Hopkins, Sept. 30, 1974, Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereafter cited as BCP).

1 Leah Garchik, *San Francisco Chronicle*, Datebook section, Dec. 9, 2004, http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/garchik/article/LEAH-GARCHIK-2665918.php.



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1 Bruce Conner, ca. 1950. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

2 *The Provincial Review*, 1952, published 1996; cover design by Bruce Conner. Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

3 OLD NOBODADDY, 1951. Oil on canvas, 14 × 12 in. (35.6 × 30.5 cm). Courtesy Conner Family Trust. Included in an exhibition organized by Bruce Conner and others at the Municipal University of Wichita in 1952–53

was called, was fellow Wichitan and sometime artistic collaborator Corban LePell, who fixed up Conner with his future wife, the artist Jean Sandstedt, after luring him to Nebraska from the Municipal University of Wichita (now Wichita State University) in 1954.[2]

Conner was born in McPherson, Kansas, in 1933, the eldest of three children. He was four years old when his family moved to Wichita, where his father was the district supervisor for a chain of grocery stores and his mother was a homemaker. In grade school Conner was taunted with anti-Semitic slurs over his middle name, Guldner, which a teacher mistakenly took to be of Jewish origin. "I was the guy to pick on. I was the dummy," Conner once said. In response, "I worked developing my talent as an artist."[3] He cited Watson Bidwell, the head of the art department at Wichita East High School, as an especially encouraging figure. An indication of their easy camaraderie can be found in Conner's high school yearbook, in which Bidwell wrote, "All play and no work made Bruce a lazy student."[4] It was in high school that Conner first encountered fellow students David Haselwood, LePell, Michael McClure, and Lee Streiff, all members of the creative circle that would come to be known as the Wichita Vortex.[5] He graduated high school in 1951 and began his undergraduate studies at the Municipal University of Wichita in the fall.

2 Jean Conner remembers that several teachers in the art department paid the rent for the Gallery, which was forced to close when a new department head prohibited teacher involvement in it. Jean Conner, transcript of interviews conducted by Robert Conway for the Conner Family Trust between July 15, 2013, and June 5, 2015, San Francisco, 6.

3 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Peter Boswell, Sept. 15, 1985, Steven Fama Collection on Bruce Conner, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 7.

4 Yearbook, carton 19, folder 6, BCP.

5 This group prompted Allen Ginsberg's visit to Wichita, memorialized in his poem "Wichita Vortex Sutra" (1966). Many of the group's members later migrated to San Francisco. Information about the Wichita Vortex, including writings by Lee Streiff, can be found at http://www.vlib.us/beats/, posted Sept. 2002, updated August 15, 2015. Streiff's treatise on the Wichita Vortex is available in hard copy, BCP.

At the university, Conner, along with Haselwood, McClure, and others in the "vortex," approached the region's parochialism with wry humor.[6] They collaborated to produce one issue of a literary magazine called the *Provincial Review*, modeled after the *Partisan Review* (fig. 2),[7] and organized a briefly tolerated Dada-inspired exhibition in a hallway of the art department (fig. 3).[8] McClure tells the following story about a visit to the Wichita Art Museum in the early 1950s:

> Bruce and I were feeling very playful, as we did most of the time. And we went into the large exhibit room of paintings, and they were all hung on wires. And we started at one end of the room and worked our way to the other and started them swinging on the wires. And then Bruce and I stood in the middle of the room watching. Of course, nobody came to the Wichita Museum ever, except Bruce and I, probably. And we watched them swing back and forth, which I realize now is a kind of Happening we created. And then Bruce took the Albert Pinkham Ryder . . . painting off the hooks, put it under his overcoat, and we started walking towards the doorway. The dear little old lady who sat at the door and knew us by name because we had been in often enough said, "Oh, Brucey dear, you've stolen the Ryder again. Put it back."[9]

This anecdote is illuminating for the irreverence, if not outright daring, it describes. Conner famously chafed at the institutional strictures of museums and the narrow demands of the marketplace, periodically renouncing them altogether, but he also accepted, albeit resignedly, that the art world was a necessary part of his métier. He once told an interviewer: "Being an artist and doing artworks in the 1950s was a rationale for my behavior. Without this rationale, my response to living in this society would likely put me in a dangerous, unpleasant place. I didn't have access to a chain of filling stations to display my work to people in their cars. I had a certain access to art exhibitions—that's where it went."[10]

Conner understood his participation in the art world as a performance, or a series of performances. Rather than capitulate to the implicit demand that he play the same role again and again, however, he followed his singular vision toward multiplicity.[11] "There are multiple personalities in every person," he once said, before describing the paper collages that he assembled from nineteenth-century steel and wood engravings as a self-restricted "game": "It is a challenge to use the limited materials in a way that is satisfying."[12] Although impatient with the mediation that institutions imposed between his work and its audience, Conner adapted his enormous talent for innovating within boundaries—often self-imposed ones—to the conditions of the art world itself, demonstrating repeatedly his capacity to thrive in circumstances that required him to make a virtue of necessity. Looking back on his career in 1996, Conner observed, "One of the purposes of my work has been to try to change the way

6 Conner told an interviewer that nude models were prohibited in drawing classes in Wichita: "Even a figure wearing a swimsuit would not have been allowed in a university art class." Interview conducted by Joan Rothfuss, Nov. 14, 1997, edited by Rothfuss, Jan. 5, 1998, and by Conner, Feb. 10, 1998, and May 1998, Walker Art Center Archives, Minneapolis, 40.

7 Internal tensions prevented the magazine from being released in May 1952 as intended; it would be published by Conner and Lee Streiff in 1996. See http://www.wichitabeats.com/wichitabeats-2/magazines-and-books-of-the-vortex-era/provincial-review/, accessed Apr. 28, 2015.

8 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Paul Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

9 Michael McClure, interview conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Conner Family Trust, session 1, Oct. 13, 2011, 1. Conner once said that he worked at the Wichita Art Museum as a guard, "so I got to know the work pretty well"; Kristine McKenna, "Bruce Conner in the Cultural Breach," *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 1990.

10 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Peter Boswell, Sept. 21, 1984, Steven Fama Collection on Bruce Conner, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 4.

11 Conner's artful obfuscation of authorial identity is the subject of Joan Rothfuss's informative essay, "Escape Artist," in *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II*, exh. cat., ed. Peter Boswell, Bruce Jenkins, and Rothfuss (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 159–83. Extending this line of inquiry into a close examination of Conner's work, art historian Kevin Hatch identifies "the central concern of his entire oeuvre" as "the struggle to reconcile the public address of art with the inescapably personal imperatives of art making." Kevin Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 195.

12 Bruce Conner in Michael Kohn, "An Interview with Bruce Conner," in *Bruce Conner: Inkblot Drawings and Engraving Collages* (Los Angeles: Kohn Turner Gallery, 1997), n.p.



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4 UNTITLED, 1954. Oil on canvas, 36 ⅛ × 34 ⅛ in. (91.8 × 86.7 cm). Wichita Art Museum, gift of William H. Conner

5 UNTITLED, 1954–56 (pl. 3, detail)

6 SIMOOM, 1953. Oil on canvas, 17 × 12 ½ in. (43.2 × 31.8 cm). Courtesy Conner Family Trust

in which people relate to artists, how museums deal with the art work; to alter the process. I have not been successful. But the process of trying repeatedly, over a long period of time, has become a part of the work."[13]

. . .

Conner made his first trip to New York in the summer of 1953. He and McClure, who had already left the Municipal University of Wichita for Tucson (Conner would transfer to the University of Nebraska in the spring semester of 1954) expected to visit art galleries but discovered, to their great disappointment, that most were closed for the summer. Hoping to ease Conner's depression,[14] McClure located the painter Robert Motherwell through the telephone book and arranged a visit:

> We went over to Robert Motherwell's place, and he greeted us at the door and invited us in and brought us into his hearth's home, so to speak, and gave us a glass of wine, and showed us works of his own and showed us the most unusual things, like very small paintings that he had by [Joan] Miró and [Yves] Tanguy and almost like miniatures that he'd collected. And it was very vivifying. He treated us very, very well. And, you know, we may have both been from Kansas and a little ignorant of New York ways, but we weren't "stupes."[15]

13 Bruce Conner in "Talking with Bruce Conner: Vision and Motion," *West* (Spring 1996): 8.

14 According to McClure, it was not primarily art that had lured Conner to New York; rather, he was following a romantic interest, who spurned him when he arrived. McClure, interview by Karlstrom, 18.

15 Ibid., 19.



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7 *Campus Capers* cartoon, published in the University of Nebraska student newspaper *The Nebraskan*, 1955. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

8 EZ FOR PREZ, 1956. Metal pin-back button, ⅞ in. (2.2 cm) diameter. Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. In 1956 Conner launched an Ezra Pound for President "campaign," announcing the controversial poet's candidacy with mailers and metal buttons

On the same trip, they made the acquaintance of Lionel Ziprin, a Kabbalist poet and the brother of a friend of McClure's. Conner subsequently earned money designing darkly humorous greeting cards for Inkweed Studios, a business established by Ziprin and his wife, Joanne (see p. 23).[16] He once described the Ziprins as "totally disorganized as business people": "They were very much involved in Kabbalah and magic theory, and Tibetan mysticism as well. . . . They would tell me stories, fantasies. Lionel gave me a book of Kabbalah that was all in Hebrew. I could not read it but he said it was good for me and it was good luck to have. And it has [a] mandala image in it."[17] Conner had been attracted to symbolically charged imagery even as a child, when he studied his grandfather's edition of Manly P. Hall's *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* and borrowed books from the Wichita Public Library on witchcraft and alchemy.

Conner's primary exposure to avant-garde art while a student was through reproductions in art magazines. "There wasn't a time when Bruce and I . . . wouldn't devour *Art News* magazine, or *Art in America* or whatever those magazines were. We couldn't wait for the next issue," LePell recalls. "We were very influenced by them, because, of course, we weren't in New York, where the action was. We were in the Midwest, where we got reproductions."[18] Conner's studio work from this period was dominated by symbolist-inspired drawings and etchings of subjects borrowed from *Dante's Inferno* (pls. 7 and 8), as well as abstract paintings whose heavily worked surfaces, sometimes incorporating collage, bear traces of his long-standing interest in geology and paleontology (figs. 4–6). In works like UNTITLED (1954–56, fig. 5 and pl. 3), he used a stylus to scrape intricate patterns into layers of paint applied to a Masonite support. Frank English, a friend of Conner's from his Nebraska days, said, "I've never seen so much work put into something."[19]

Art was inextricable from Conner's everyday activities as a student, as it would be throughout his life. Jean recalls that he and LePell created sweatshirts that read "Property of the Louvre" in response to popular athletic wear announcing "Property of University of Nebraska." "Bruce had a conga drum and used to walk up and down the streets around the university

16 Future Bay Area experimental filmmakers Jordan Belson and Harry Smith were also associated with Ziprin at this time.

17 Conner, interview by Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973.

18 Corban LePell, interview conducted by Robert Conway for the Conner Family Trust, July 30, 2012, Oakland, 10.

19 The work is now in English's collection. Frank English, interview conducted by Robert Conway for the Conner Family Trust, Oct. 11, 2012, New York, 10.

playing on it," she says, adding, "I think that people at the university just thought we were weird!"[20] Drawn from his own experiences, Conner's *Campus Capers* cartoons in the student newspaper skewered the art establishment. In one, an artist points to a flower painted on an otherwise abstract canvas. His face aghast, he exclaims, "Somebody has ruined my painting!" Another seems to anticipate Conner's discord with museums (fig. 7).

In June 1955, while still an undergraduate, Conner again traveled to New York, this time in search of gallery representation: "I was walking down the street with four framed oil paintings and a big portfolio and my slides, and photographs. It must have been sixty pounds of stuff and I was walking to all these galleries. I would walk in. The guy would say, 'I can't see anybody. I am making money. Can't you see I am making money? Get out of here!' It certainly was not a very friendly reception."[21] By Conner's account, he visited twenty galleries before showing his work to Charles Alan, who purchased three pieces from him. Recounting this tale of precocity, he later said, "That is why I never got another gallery in New York. I figured that anybody that would do that, notwithstanding whatever kind of economic advantages, that was the person to stay with."[22]

Conner earned his bachelor's degree in fine arts from the University of Nebraska at the end of 1955 and spent the following six months in New York as a student at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, which awarded him its Max Beckmann Memorial Scholarship. He studied with Reuben Tam, who exhibited at the Alan Gallery. By May 1956 Conner was showing his work there as well. He lived on Manhattan's Lower East Side, "in the area where all the ragpickers of New York would bring their rags and clothes to sell." Conner realized in retrospect that neighborhood store windows "piled with multicolored cloth" gave him the idea to make assemblages using window frames (see pl. 17).[23] Although he had spent previous summers in New York, his experience there in 1956 convinced him that it was not the place for him. That fall he joined Jean at the University of Colorado in Boulder, which had offered him a scholarship to pursue graduate studies.

Conner would not complete his master's degree but he did leave behind a significant legacy at the university. At Boulder he cofounded, with Jean and several others, the Experimental Cinema Group, which continues today as First Person Cinema. Large crowds attended the organization's screenings of historical and experimental films at a time when the idea of film as art was just gaining acceptance.[24] Stan Brakhage introduced his own films in person and acted as an advisor.[25] "He told me I ought to make movies," Conner later told an interviewer. "But I didn't want to."[26]

Narrative chronology continues on page 29

20 Jean Conner, interviews by Conway, 5.

21 Conner, interview by Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973.

22 Ibid. Correspondence between the two shows Alan to have been a patient and supportive figure throughout Conner's early career.

23 Conner, interview by Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973.

24 Conner's fascination with movies, and especially with the artifice of film, began in childhood. A relative did promotional work for theaters in Wichita, giving him frequent access to movies. Jean Conner, interviews by Conway, 8. "It was an exciting adventure, being a kid running up and down the stairs and being carried away in an adventure film," Bruce Conner recalled. Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Peter Boswell, Feb. 11, 1986, revised by Conner, Apr. 20, 1997, Walker Art Center Archives, Minneapolis, 7.

25 Conner first met Brakhage while visiting McClure in San Francisco. Jean Conner, note to the author, Aug. 3, 2015. According to Bruce Conner, the trip took place in summer 1956, interview by Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973.

26 Conner, interview by Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973.

INKWEED STUDIOS

Carol Bove

Since 2012 I have assisted in caring for the Lionel Ziprin Archive, which I came across as a result of my interest in the polymath Harry Smith, a close friend and collaborator of Ziprin. The archive contains materials directly related to Smith, as well as an interesting assortment of works by a young Bruce Conner.

Lionel Ziprin (1924–2009) lived his entire life on New York's Lower East Side. He was highly respected as a teacher and mentor of artists and poets pursuing esoteric knowledge. Poet and filmmaker Ira Cohen once described him as "one of the big secret heroes"[1] of the 1950s and 1960s. He was a poet's poet who was not interested in publishing his work and a Kabbalist from an important line of Kabbalists going back as early as the twelfth century. Ziprin's wife, Joanne Eashe (1919–1994), was a model and clothing designer who sought out Ziprin after reading one of his few published poems. She introduced him to Tibetan Buddhism and some of the most influential jazz musicians of the 1950s.

The Ziprin apartment was one of the most significant meeting places for the postwar American avant-garde. It was particularly dynamic because the couple's separate and extensive scenes merged when they married; he brought Old World mysticism and the advanced poetry scene, and she brought the jazz musicians. At the time, poetry was closely linked with avant-garde film, avant-garde music, and occult studies; artists working in any of these spheres knew Lionel and Joanne through a close social network. The Ziprins held something of a salon, though instead of the organization and exclusivity that word implies, they saw a stream of pilgrims, refugees, and deadbeats along with luminaries—the last category not being distinct from the others.

In 1951 the newly wed Joanne and Lionel founded a greeting card company, Inkweed Studios. The business provided day jobs and revenue for themselves and a group of like-minded artists and designers. In a letter to investors they explained, "[We have] worked hard to design, perfect and market an idea in greeting cards we believe in . . . having to do with imagination, bits of black magic and shoestrings, which all too few people accept in lieu of cold, hard cash."[2] The Ziprins collaborated on cards for the company and employed a number of other artists, including Jordan Belson, Dinka Kara, William Mohr, Barbara Remington, and Harry Smith. Their most prolific contributor was an undergraduate art student then studying at the University of Nebraska: Bruce Conner.

The Ziprins saved dozens of letters from Conner that document their long-distance collaboration. The letters typically describe the card designs they accompanied and frequently include printing suggestions. Conner often developed card concepts in detail: "A cleverly conceived valentine's card. Humorous indeed. On the face is a forbidding creature which is saying, 'Why so pale and wan, fond lover?' Also, it can be interpreted that 'it' is the one that has been thusly addressed and is awestruck and terrified, with mouth agape, at the one who has said this. Within is the plea, 'Won't you be my valentine?'" (See fig. 1.)

The letters from Conner to the Ziprins sometimes include product ideas, as in this list of cards from an undated letter probably written around 1955:

1. A reproduction of Astarte with a hundred breasts: *There are a hundred reasons why I love you, dear.*
2. Sculpture of Romulus and Remus suckled by a wolf: *You were like a mother to me.*
3. Prometheus bound to a rock with his liver being plucked out: *You're a clean liver.*
4. Venus de Milo: *I would give my all for you.*

Other letters include ideas for bookplates, chess sets, tarot cards, and an illustrated Dante's *Inferno*.

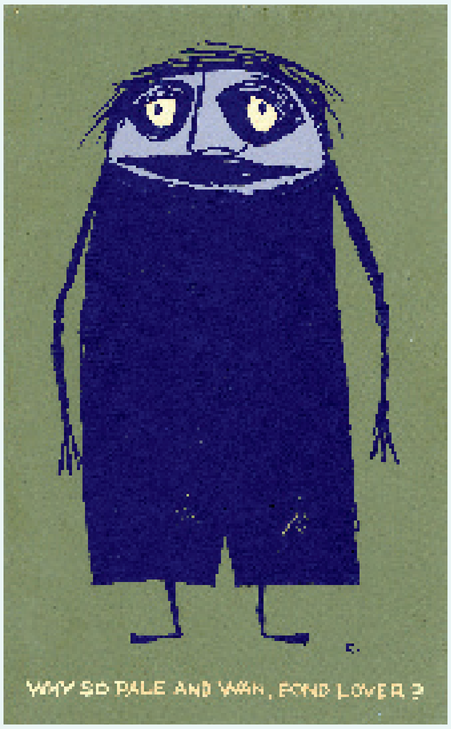
The Ziprins' letters to Conner are not in the archive, but we can infer that they sometimes gave him suggestions for designs. Included in a letter from Conner detailing a list of finished designs is this explanation: "You mentioned on your list of everydays [i.e., not holiday cards] a general Congratulations or even the word itself if the lettering were sufficiently crazy. I have done that. 'Congratulations' is barely legible."

One letter provides an interesting view on his parallel work in the classroom at the University of Nebraska. In a letter from 1954 he wrote, in response to a suggestion that he make linoleum-cut card designs, "I'm going to be able to work on the linoleum blocks in an art class next semester so I'll probably be able to turn out more than I would otherwise." These might sound like the words of a hustler in another context, but Conner's ambition was earnest. Other letters attest that he was under great pressure from his father to make money and was eager to please the Ziprins.

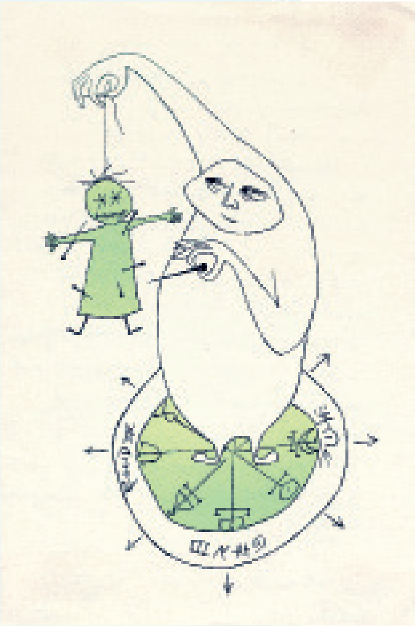
The Inkweed cards are so eccentric that I initially imagined the company was a pretext to smoke weed and make drawings with friends. Yet it turns out to have been a less dysfunctional business than I had suspected. In the fall of 1954 Conner was making about $50 per month on royalties (the equivalent of $300 today), an appreciable income for a student.

Several letters document a contract disagreement between Conner and Fred Mann, the president of Inkweed Studios during its change of ownership. Conner wrote, "It was not just a business arrangement, but a personal thing and I put my confidence in the Ziprins. I was not working for Inkweed Studios, an abstract name, but rather for the people and philosophy behind it that it symbolized. The complete character and quality and meaning of the name Inkweed Studios depended upon the Ziprins and without their guiding spirit it is but an empty shell; a meaningless thing."

The Ziprins were important figures in the informal education Conner pursued alongside his formal schooling. Working for Inkweed was a very stimulating job that



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1 "Why so pale and wan, fond lover?" Card design by Bruce Conner for Inkweed Studios, ca. 1954. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

2 "I'm always thinking of you . . ." Card design by Bruce Conner for Inkweed Studios, ca. 1954. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

intellectually and financially nurtured his art making and guaranteed contact with well-regarded collaborators. In addition to card designs and production considerations, his letters describe his paintings in progress and are often accompanied by sketches and diagrams. They list the books he was reading, the music he was listening to, and many other facets of his creative and personal life, including the crazy way his apartment was decorated and how his neighbors almost killed him after he got a conga drum. If he didn't consider the Ziprins mentors—and I think he probably did—he certainly valued them as an audience.

1 Ira Cohen quoted in William Grimes, "Lionel Ziprin, Mystic of the Lower East Side, Dies at Eighty-Four," *New York Times*, Mar. 20, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/21/arts/21ziprin.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

2 Joanne and Lionel Ziprin quoted in press release for *From Inkweed to Haunted Ink: The Beat Greeting Card*, John McWhinnie @ Glenn Horowitz Booksellers, Dec. 2011.



2 **UNTITLED** June 1, 1955 Oil on Masonite in artist's wood frame
24½ × 24 in. (62.2 × 61 cm)
Collection of Robert Harshorn Shimshak and Marion Brenner





3 **UNTITLED** 1954–56 Oil and gold leaf on Masonite
16 × 10 in. (40.6 × 25.4 cm)
Collection of Frank English

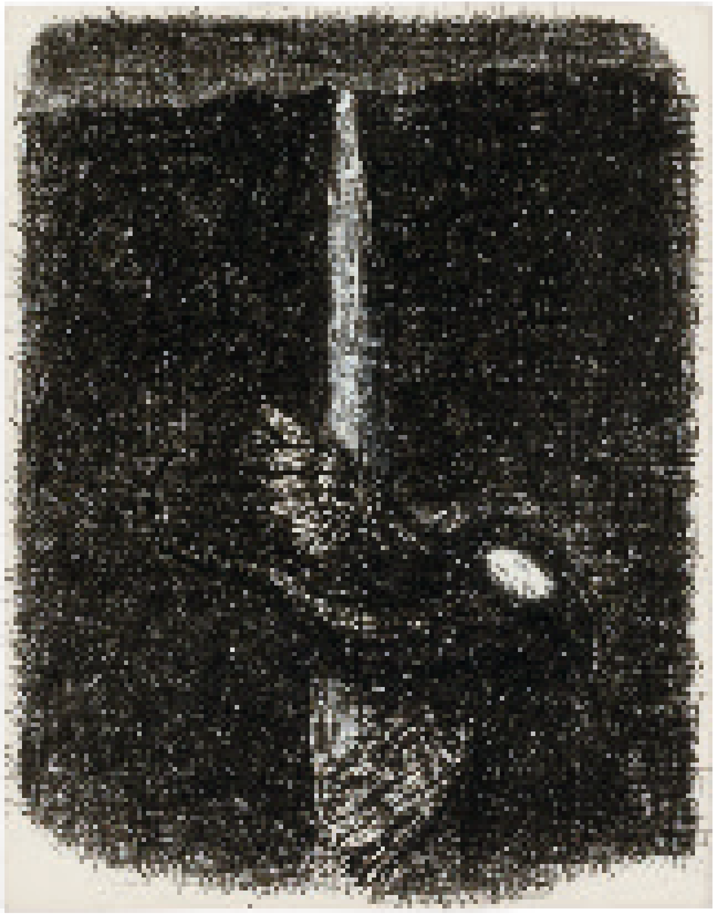
4 **UNTITLED** 1955 Oil on canvas in artist's wood frame
15½ × 15½ in. (39.4 × 39.4 cm)
Collection of Lydia Mattar Titcomb



5 **SPIDER** 1955 Oil and charcoal on canvas
21 × 18 in. (53.3 × 45.7 cm)
Balkanski Family Collection



6 **UNTITLED** May 10, 1957 Oil and gold leaf on Masonite
22 ½ × 19 in. (57.2 × 48.3 cm)
Collection of Guillaume Malle





7 **GERYON** September 23, 1955 Ink on paper
8½ × 6¾ in. (21.6 × 17.2 cm)
Private collection

8 **BRUNETTO LATINO** 1956 Ink on paper
8 × 6¾ in. (20.3 × 17.2 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Robert and Lynne Dean in memory of Larry Secrist

Jean earned her master's degree in fine arts from the University of Colorado in 1957, and Conner returned to Wichita that summer to earn money. On September 1 they were married in Lincoln, Nebraska, Jean's hometown. Immediately after the wedding they moved to San Francisco. When asked why he chose it, of all places, Conner replied, "Where the hell else would I go?"[27] He later said, "San Francisco had a reputation for tolerance of different views. . . . There were people exploring words, music, dance, sculpture, and painting in unique ways that you wouldn't find in New York or anyplace else in the country."[28] He also felt that San Francisco offered him a better chance of obtaining a 4-F exemption from the U.S. Army than Wichita did. Through a combination of embellishment and genuine distress, Conner convinced a psychiatrist to recommend that he receive a 4-F.[29] Conner was virulently antimilitary. He would later say, "The army . . . not only isolates men from the company of women, but it takes that creative force . . . and turns it into a destructive force."[30]

The Conners had a number of friends in San Francisco, including McClure and Larry Jordan, who got Conner his first job (helping to build a movie theater, a brief engagement that ended when Conner sprained his ankle) and with whom he cofounded the short-lived Camera Obscura film society. They stayed briefly with McClure and his wife, Joanna, whose neighbors at 2322 Fillmore Street included artists Sonia Gechtoff and James Kelly, and Jay DeFeo and Wally Hedrick.[31] DeFeo would become a close lifelong friend and artistic influence (figs. 9 and 10). Conner credited the Christmas party that she and Hedrick held several months after his arrival with inspiring his earliest assemblages, including the aptly titled HOMAGE TO JAY DEFEO (1958, pl. 12), saying: "She'd wrapped packages like Christmas presents and hung them from the ceiling. The packages themselves were works of art."[32]

Parties served an important function in this milieu, which also included Wallace Berman, George Herms, Robert Duncan, and Jess. Jean recalls that Robert Branaman "would bring his films to a party, and Bruce would bring his 8mm projector, and we'd all sit on the floor watching films on the wall. Bob had pieces of film that he kept in a paper bag. He'd pull one out and Bruce would string it up on the projector and show it, not knowing what it was, just whatever came up."[33]

Unlike those in New York, artists in San Francisco had little expectation that they could make a living from their art. As Conner described it:

> The Six Gallery would have an opening and everybody would have a lot of beer and wine and get drunk and maybe Wally Hedrick and Dixieland friends would play music. The only way it was opened afterwards was that one of those artists who ran the place would have to go and open it up. . . .

27 Conner, interview by Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973.

28 Bruce Conner in Marc Selwyn, "Marilyn and the Spaghetti Theory" (interview), *Flash Art* 24, no. 156 (Jan.–Feb. 1991): 97.

29 Conner said that he was "in a nervous state for perhaps eight or nine years" over the prospect of being drafted into the army, which was "an extension of everything I hated about the whole society." Bruce Conner in Rebecca Solnit, "Bruce Conner: The Assemblage Years" (interview), *Expo-See*, no. 14 (Jan.–Feb. 1985): n.p. According to Conner, the psychiatrist who wrote the letter that resulted in his 4-F told him that he did not lie, though he knew that Conner was actively seeking a deferral. Conner, interview by Boswell, Sept. 15, 1985, 9–10.

30 Conner, interview by Karlstrom, Aug. 12, 1974.

31 In 1958 Joan and Bill Brown took over Gechtoff and Kelly's apartment. On the artist-residents of 2322 Fillmore and surrounding area, see Anastasia Aukeman, *Welcome to Painterland: Bruce Conner and the Rat Bastard Protective Association* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

32 Conner, interview by Karlstrom, Aug. 12, 1974.

33 Jean Conner, interviews by Conway, 11.



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9 THE WHITE ROSE, 1967 (still). 16mm, black and white, sound, 7 min. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

10 Handwritten note with photograph, sent by Jay DeFeo to Bruce Conner, n.d. Bruce Conner Photograph Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

11 Rat Bastard Protective Association stamp on the back of the assemblage HUNK JUNK DING DONG YING YANK (1959)

12 Bruce Conner wearing RAT BACK PACK (1959). Photograph by Ernie Burden. Bruce Conner Photograph Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

> The idea of having shows was silly. . . . Why have a show? Just have a party. If you are going to have a show, why bother to take on all the trimmings and expectations of what art should be as a permanent work of art? Why spend your money on that if nobody is going to buy it? You *really* are doing it for yourself.[34]

Founded in the heady year of 1958, Conner's Rat Bastard Protective Association (RBP) exemplified this attitude. "Ratbastard" was a term McClure had overheard in a gym's locker room, and Conner borrowed the rest of the name from the Scavenger's Protective Association, the local garbage collectors; it also derived from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB). Among those Conner invited to join the association were Jean, Joan Brown, DeFeo, Haselwood, Hedrick, Fred Martin, and Carlos Villa. They were asked to use an approved stamp (fig. 11) on their works and to attend meetings—or "'meeting' parties," as Brown described them—at members' homes.[35] Most did not pay the prescribed dues, Conner noted, "But they supplied the beer and good times."[36] As Brown said, "The point was that there was really no point."[37]

The spectacle of the Scavenger's Protective Association, whose burlap trash bags hung off the sides of their trucks and were described by Conner as "big pendulous testicles," inspired his first assemblage, RATBASTARD (1958, pl. 10), and subsequent works that could be carried or worn like appendages (fig. 12).[38] McClure refers to Conner's RATBASTARD works in his autobiographical *Fleas* (n.d.):

34 Conner, interview by Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973.

35 Joan Brown quoted in Sandra Leonard Starr, ed., *Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art*, exh. cat. (Santa Monica: James Corcoran Gallery, 1988), 99.

36 Conner, interview by Karlstrom, Aug. 12, 1974.

37 Brown, quoted in *Lost and Found in California*, 99.

38 Conner, interview by Karlstrom, Aug. 12, 1974.

Greatest Invention
of the
TWENTIETH-CENTURY.
The first one I couldn't believe
—a little handle on a broken painting
with photos on the back
in a black
silk stocking.[39]

Like the trash collectors, Conner worked with society's discards, purchasing items from secondhand shops and scavenging materials from the Victorian houses then being torn down in the nearby Western Addition, which writer Rebecca Solnit has described as "a black neighborhood whose decline-and-fall romanticism fascinated many artists."[40] Conner said, "To me, there were these jewels that were being strewn all over the place as if they were trash and I was gathering them all."[41] His own poverty propelled him toward these materials, while the absence of a market made durability an afterthought. Economic necessity also dictated the form of his first film, A MOVIE (1958, pl. 9), which he created by selecting and splicing frames from condensed versions of feature films, documentaries, and newsreels that he found at a photo store. "I don't own anything except the splices," he said. "I put it together—and it was . . . a totally different thing."[42]

Conner's participation in the annual exhibitions of the San Francisco Art Association garnered him visibility beyond a small circle of artists. In 1958 he received his first major public recognition when he was awarded the association's Anne Bremer Memorial Prize for Painting for a collage he had completed at the University of Nebraska in 1954 (pl. 1) (he continued to work on its riotous back side for several years). The competition was judged by Thomas Hess, the executive editor of the New York–based *Art News.* As an awardee, Conner was invited to exhibit his work in the association's subsequent annual member shows.

"In 1958 I was painting my windows and creating collages, assemblages, theater events, and parades through [San Francisco's] North Beach," Conner said. "Things were happening there that people later were calling 'Happenings' in New York."[43] The flier for a "Mad Monster Mammoth Poets' Reading," a benefit for Haselwood's Auerhahn Press held on August 29, 1959, announced a "spectacle of Objects, made for the Event, that shall accompany a WayOut WALK OF POETS" staged by Conner and Robert LaVigne. A Rat Bastard parade the previous year culminated in what Conner described as "a poetry duel between Philip Lamantia and some bullshit poet who had moved in from New York for about two months to take advantage of the publicity there was about North Beach."[44]

39 Michael McClure, *Fleas* #19, BCP. From a remove of several decades, Conner thought the term *ratbastard* "seemed to be a more appropriate term" to refer to the work he and his associates were making at the time, "because it was one that we named ourselves by, not somebody else. So that we were not going to be insulted by being called beatnik, or later, Funk artist." Bruce Conner, transcript of lecture given at the de Young Museum, San Francisco, on the occasion of the exhibition *Beat Culture and the New America, 1950–1965*, Oct. 12, 1996, BCP, 9.

40 Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990), 61.

41 Conner in Selwyn, "Marilyn and the Spaghetti Theory," 94.

42 Bruce Conner in James S. Elliot, "I Don't Own Anything But the Splices" (interview conducted Oct. 15, 1976), *Cinemantics: The Film Journal of the Austin Film and Video Society* (1977): 19. Conner credits Larry Jordan with teaching him how to use a splicer. See William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993), 81.

43 Conner, interview by Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973.

44 Bruce Conner quoted in Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 71. See also Peter Plagens, *Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast, 1945–1970* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 78; and Bruce Nixon, "The Spatsa Gallery: A Portrait," in Seymour Howard et al., *The Beat Generation Galleries and Beyond* (Davis, CA: John Natsoulas Press, 1996), 142–43.



13



14

13 THE BOX, 1960. Wax figure, suitcase, tin cans, shredded nylon, straw hat, and other materials, in wood box, 32 ¼ × 20 ⅜ × 35 ¼ in. (81.7 × 51.7 × 89.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund

14 SUPERHUMAN DEVOTION, 1959 (back); no longer extant. Photographed in Conner's studio. Courtesy Conner Family Trust. Front view on p. 324

Disturbed by the culture of conformity and sanctioned violence during the Cold War, Conner initiated a street action in response to the violent suppression of a student protest against the House Un-American Activities Committee held at San Francisco City Hall in May 1960: "They had thousands of people out there with signs running around. So I went down there the next day with the CHILD [1959, pl. 50] on my shoulders, on the high chair, and a sign on there, said, 'Stop Police Brutality.'" Student leaders objected, however: "They said, 'You know, we're here to protest the Un-American Activities Committee. And we don't want to disturb the police.' And I said, 'Well, you know, I don't give a damn about the committee. . . . I think the real event that's happened is that these police have demonstrated their political capacity to brutalize anybody that they want to.'" Conner failed to convince the students, who were hostile toward him. In this way, he discovered that his political activity "didn't fit into the norm of the political activity here that was taking place."[45]

Conner had exhibited CHILD earlier that year at the San Francisco Art Association's annual members' exhibition, held at the de Young Museum.[46] The work was his response to the impending execution of Caryl Chessman, a Los Angeles man who had been convicted of rape, robbery, and kidnapping in 1948, and sentenced to death on a technicality. Conner and many others believed that Chessman "was being sacrificed by the system." "My view of him," he said, "was that he was entirely a child of our society. And it was because the parents were upset by the fact that they had failed so miserably in their bringing up of this child that they were going to destroy it."[47] The *San Francisco Examiner* called the work "a prime example of pessimism . . . like something a ghoul would steal from a graveyard."[48] But the work earned Conner the admiration of influential art world figures, including Peter Selz, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, and architect Philip Johnson, who purchased and later donated the work to MoMA. In December 1960, when Selz was invited to San Francisco to judge *Daily Bread*, an exhibition of the National Council of Churches, he awarded Conner first prize for THE BOX (1960, fig. 13), a related work, also in black wax, that entered MoMA's collection in 1961.[49]

45 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Paul Karlstrom and Serge Guilbaut, Mar. 29, 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

46 CHILD was in fact a substitution for the work MA JOLIE RATBASTARD (1959), which the de Young deemed too controversial because it included a condom. Fred Martin, then chair of the exhibitions committee, told Conner that the San Francisco Art Association would sooner withdraw the show than allow a work to be censored, but Conner submitted CHILD instead. Letter from Bruce Conner to John Natsoulas and Bruce Nixon, Jan. 13, 1991, BCP, 2.

47 Conner, interview by Karlstrom and Guilbaut, Mar. 29, 1974. After twelve years of appeals, Chessman was executed at San Quentin State Prison on May 2, 1960.

48 Alexander Fried, "A Violent Exhibit," *San Francisco Examiner*, Dec. 27, 1959.

49 Conner considered the wax sculptures, which he created between 1959 and 1964, to be a discrete body of work. In the 1990s he worked closely with both the Whitney Museum of American Art and the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University to present an exhibition of these works, but it never came to fruition.

Selz subsequently recommended Conner's work to William Seitz for inclusion in *The Art of Assemblage* (1961), a MoMA exhibition that sought to establish an art historical pedigree for assemblage art, which was then gaining prominence. Conner served as Seitz's guide when the curator visited the Bay Area in search of work to include in the show. He later recalled that he tried, unsuccessfully, to convince Seitz of the ubiquity of so-called assemblage art by taking him to one of his favorite secondhand shops, where the owner "would make these little environments of like an ice cream soda glass with doctor's mirror, on top of which there would be a doll's head with an eye missing and a feather would be coming up through the doll's eye which was looking at a mirror mounted on a post five feet away which was lined up with this hand-done painting of Abraham Lincoln."[50]

The opening reception for *The Art of Assemblage* would become the setting for one of Conner's most memorable actions. Two of his works had arrived in New York damaged. The owner of DEADLY NIGHTSHADE (1960), which was slated for inclusion in the MoMA exhibition, refused to allow Conner to repair it, preferring instead to collect the insurance; to Conner's dismay, the museum did not contest the decision. The second assemblage, SUPERHUMAN DEVOTION (1959, fig. 14 and p. 324), was to be included in a solo exhibition at the Alan Gallery. "I didn't want to restructure it, reorganize it, and restore it. It could not be done. A moment of superhuman devotion is not repeatable," Conner later said. "I took all of its innards out, as if it was being prepared for embalming."[51] He placed the contents in a crate, which he and artist Ray Johnson roughed up, eventually setting it on fire: "The next day was the opening of the 'Assemblage Art' show. I forgot to bring my invitation for the black tie reception. I put a rope handle on SUPERHUMAN DEVOTION and told Ray Johnson to meet me at the museum. . . . When the General Members opening started I went to check the box in the museum checkroom. They refused to accept it. . . . I was carrying my canopic box in the exhibition entrance and the guards stopped me. . . . 'Only authorized works of art are allowed here.'"[52] Conner briefly considered leaving: "I walked out the revolving door. . . . I stood with it on the pavement while people walked around me to go into the Assemblage show. I took it back through the revolving door and put it down in a direct line from the door to the guarded entrance. Set it down and walked in." Conner and Johnson later left the exhibition together, taking SUPERHUMAN DEVOTION with them on the Staten Island Ferry. "When we were closest to the Statue of Liberty I asked Ray to come with me to the end of the ferry. He held one side of the box and I held the other," Conner recalled. "We swung it back and forth three times and then tossed it into the ocean."[53]

Narrative chronology continues on page 83

50 Conner in Selwyn, "Marilyn and the Spaghetti Theory," 94.

51 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Peter Boswell, Sept. 1, 1985, part 1, Walker Art Center Archives, Minneapolis, 4.

52 Ibid., 5–6.

53 Ibid., 6–7. There are a number of examples of Conner's willingness to destroy or abandon his own work, notably in his treatment of RELIQUARY (1964, p. 335), which he left on the doorstep of a shuttered store on Haight Street where he had once worked, watching as it was dismantled in the ensuing weeks: "It stayed there for about three and a half weeks or a month before it disappeared." Conner, interview by Rothfuss, Nov. 14, 1997, 2.

FOLLOWING PAGES: 9

A MOVIE 1958
16mm film, black and white, sound, 12 min.
Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (Accessions Committee Fund purchase) and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, with the generous support of the New Art Trust


9
THE END
A
8
THE END
MOVIE
7
THE END
BY
6
MOVIE
BRUCE CONNER
START
41







10 **RATBASTARD** (front and back) 1958 Wood, canvas, nylon, fabric, printed paper, newspaper, wire, oil paint, nails, and bead chain
16½ × 9¼ × 2¾ in. (41.9 × 23.5 × 7 cm)
Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, gift of Lannan Foundation, 1997

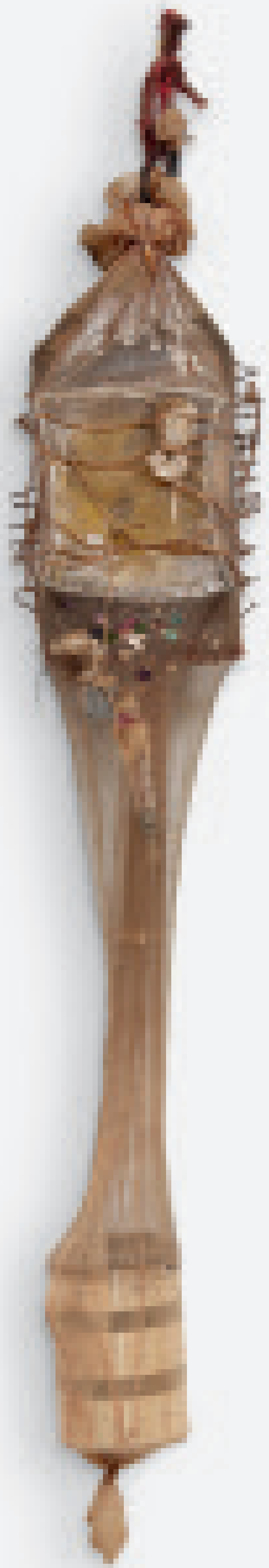




11 **RATBASTARD 2** (front and back) 1958 Wood, nylon, twine, candle, glass marbles, paint, nutshells, printed paper, metal charm, string, feather, and sequins
20½ × 10¾₁₆ × 2¹⁄₁₆ in. (52.1 × 25.9 × 5.2 cm)
Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, gift of Lannan Foundation, 1997



12 **HOMAGE TO JAY DEFEO** 1958 Cardboard, nylon, costume jewelry, book wrapped in fabric and twine, beads, paper, plastic, glass, postage stamps, rubber bands, burned fabric, staples, and zipper
32 × 10 × 4 in. (81.3 × 25.4 × 10.2 cm)
mumok Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, former Hahn Collection, Cologne, acquired in 1978



13 **RAT PURSE** 1959 Nylon, wax, gold leaf, cardboard box, printed paper, rubber tubes, syringe, feathers, sequins, fabric, nails, metal can, fur, tobacco, string, and twine
37 × 6½ × 5½ in. (94 × 16.5 × 14 cm)
Tomeo Family Trust, Santa Barbara, California



14 **LADY BRAIN** 1960 Fabric, rope, beads, tin can, fringe, nylon, cardboard, newspaper, cowrie shells, thumbtacks, and radio
56 × 12 × 10 in. (142.2 × 30.5 × 25.4 cm)
Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, California, gift of the Robert and Ruth Halperin Foundation





15 **AFTER PEYOTE** (full view and detail) 1959–60 Nylon, book cover, glass, costume jewelry, wristwatch parts, plastic, filmstrips, paper, feathers, eyelash curler, rubber, metal, netting, string, and twine
$41\frac{1}{4} \times 7\frac{13}{16} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$ in. (104.8 × 19.8 × 8.9 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Nell Sinton



16 **SPIDER LADY HOUSE** 1959 Wood, nylon, ice skate, doll parts, string, costume jewelry, feathers, fur, bottle caps, wallpaper, and paper on plywood
47¾ × 48 × 8 in. (121.3 × 121.9 × 20.3 cm)
Oakland Museum of California, gift of the Collectors Gallery and the National Endowment for the Arts



17 **SPIDER LADY** 1959 Painted-wood window frame, window shade, window screen, nylon, garter belt, bicycle wheel, printed paper, metal Band-Aid box, twine, cigarette butts, lead customs seal on string, fabric, filmstrip, tacks, and nails
37 ½ × 31⅛ × 5 15/16 in. (95.3 × 79.1 × 15.1 cm)
Collection of Marguerite Hoffman



18 **SPIDER LADY NEST** 1959 Wood box with aluminum paint, spray paint, window shade, nylon, thread, fabric, fur, lead customs seal on string, pearl bead, cotton ball, feathers, tassels, and cardboard
31 × 28½ × 7 in. (78.7 × 72.4 × 17.8 cm)
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, Richard Brown Baker, BA 1935, Collection



19 **ARACHNE** 1959 Nylon, cardboard, aluminum, paint, electrical cords, vacuum tube, Plexiglas, doll head, fabric, metal foil, bamboo mat, playing card, newsprint, twine, ball, candy wrapper, plastic, wood chips, staples, nails, tack, wire, brush, beads, and window screen on plywood
65 ¾ × 48 ¾ × 4 ¼ (167 × 123.8 × 10.8 cm)
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., bequest of Edith S. and Arthur J. Levin

FOLLOWING PAGES: 20 **BREAKAWAY** 1966 16mm film, black and white, sound, 5 min.
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase





THREE WOMEN, THREE FILMS: BRUCE CONNER IN THE 1960S

Dara Birnbaum

> *It was just like somebody just ripped a veil off my eyes. It was like somebody took a blindfold off me.*
>
> —Dennis Hopper, upon seeing A MOVIE[1]

I never had the experience of meeting Bruce Conner, nor do I remember discussing his work with my peers (many of us were later referred to as the Pictures Generation). Why had Conner's name not crossed our lips, nor even entered into our conversations over drinks? For example: Conner's CROSSROADS (1976, pl. 125), a dark, sublime portrayal of the first nuclear weapons tests conducted at Bikini Atoll (code name: Operation Crossroads), preceded by twenty-seven years Robert Longo's *The Sickness of Reason* (2003), a series of intense black charcoal drawings of atomic explosions. Conner's repeat edits and extreme slow motion, along with the musical compositions of Patrick Gleeson and Terry Riley, lent a gravitas to the event differing from the highly detailed, static "picture images" of Longo. Conner's BREAKAWAY (1966, pl. 20) also preceded the performance by Nam June Paik as "Mr. X" at the Kitchen, New York (ca. 1981). At Paik's "orchestrated" performance, an unidentified woman removes her clothes and immediately afterward, the video shot of this event (by John Sanborn) plays in reverse, thus showing the woman re-dressing. That reverse footage was previously videoed and edited in Sanborn's downtown Manhattan loft—so the playback (the re-dress) was a ruse. Conner's film, fifteen years earlier, also can be seen obliquely as a striptease, one in which Conner authentically reverses his film imagery and sound and takes us back to its equally poignant beginning.

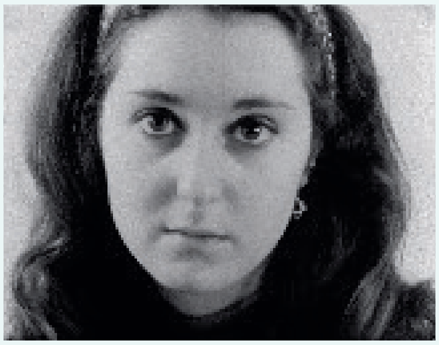
Conner's 16mm film works from the 1960s—COSMIC RAY (1961), VIVIAN (1964), and BREAKAWAY—strongly resonate with me, and I consider this body of work a muse to be reckoned with. I find an almost obsessive need to question (and penetrate) Conner's relationship to the women he portrayed in each of these works. Perhaps this is a similar questioning—almost an "irritation"—I had when I viewed television's *Wonder Woman* in 1978 and *The Hollywood Squares* in 1979.[2] However, Conner's images of women suggest a more intimate relationship to his subject: not a deconstruction of but an engagement with an enigmatic celluloid dream, desire unfulfilled, toyed with, teased with, *danced* with. Perhaps one could even see his portrayals as "loves" made existent through the safety of his lens, magnificently cut to a heartbeat, repeated, and altered. Conner thus consistently seems to objectify his desire, to project it onto the women he was filming—or even at moments to transform those very images (*turned object*) into the *abject* (in COSMIC RAY, for example, quick takes of a nude dancer reveal a human skull between her legs, fig. 4).

Perhaps the significance of these representations of women, or his relationship to them (as the line differentiating the two is hard to draw in his work), is most clearly exposed in VIVIAN. Here, two flash edits of literal "signs"—almost too quick for the eye to see—occupy the screen: "Touch" and "Do Not Touch." These signs, floating amid the footage, most likely were present in Conner's exhibition at the Batman Gallery in San Francisco in 1964 (which lasted just three days, with Conner never leaving the gallery). It was partially there that VIVIAN was filmed.

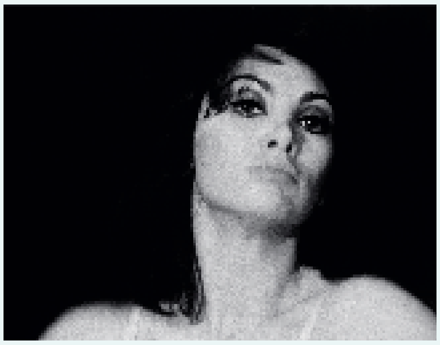
COSMIC RAY,[3] as with many of Conner's films, starts in silence. Then, with a count-down leader that goes *awry*—no longer subservient to what its true function is—there is an unexpected explosion of sound and we are on our way. A voice announces, "That's it." The rest of the film, with multiply sourced found footage, is melded to the soundtrack of Ray Charles's "What'd I Say." Very quick montages emerge, presenting another world, in which Conner edits a consistent "piercing" of his own shots of dancers with a multiplicity of images and firecracker barrages. Disruptions (seen as death and destruction) come in the form of an academy leader, perforations, an atomic bomb, an African man, perhaps a cheetah (an advancing enemy), war, Mickey Mouse with a long deflated cannon (like a penis losing erection after ejaculation) among marching soldiers and those stationed at Iwo Jima, guns continuously firing, as we ourselves are bombarded by images of war and sex. It ends with the spoken words "What a show! What a show!" over a black screen.

Beth Pewter, an artist from Witchita who appears as a dancer in this film, recalls, "Bruce came and asked if I would be in his film. I had such admiration for him as an artist that I said yes. He came over with a big piece of black velvet that he put up on one wall . . . then he had me dance nude while he filmed me. I was doing it for art so I didn't feel like there was anything wrong with it. . . . So I was very honored that I was in this work of genius."[4]

Vivian Kurz, the protagonist in VIVIAN (fig. 1), escapes us as well, while seductively engaging us—toyed with and toying with—ending up in a "glass coffin" (a vitrine in the 1964 exhibition of Conner's work at the Batman Gallery). This use of the vitrine precedes, by fifty years, Tilda Swinton's *The Maybe* (2013), her performance art work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.[5] Although differing somewhat in intention, a "woman in a glass vitrine" remains a consistent iconography. Conner's version allowed for an engaged interactivity with gallery visitors, however, as specificially women were encouraged to enter the "glass coffin."[6] Vivian, accompanied by Conway Twitty's version of "Mona Lisa," and laughing most of the way, performs what can be seen as a youthful love poem, the film following her through a flirtatious tour of Conner's nonstop exhibition and an equally beguiling sequence of shots in what is assumed to be her own apartment. There is a coupling—as Vivian, still camera in hand, shoots Conner as he portrays her—at times in such extreme close-up that only her lips and teeth are shown. Kurz's view must also be noted, however. She has said: "I feel that I am a part of the creation of the film . . . everything I do is my natural response in relation to Bruce, to the art, and to myself. Thus, I find VIVIAN to be a co-creation, and that my youth and the atmosphere around me or my very being is



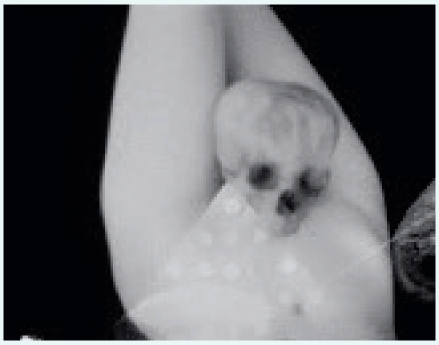
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2



3



4

1 VIVIAN, 1964 (still). 16mm film, black and white, sound, 3 min. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

2 BREAKAWAY, 1966 (pl. 20, still)

3–4 COSMIC RAY, 1961 (still). 16mm film, black and white, sound, 4:43 min. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

a part of the whole creative process. Bruce had the vision to see this and also bring it out in me. So it is a relationship that is very present."[7]

BREAKAWAY was an even more collaborative engagement, this time between Conner and Antonia Christina Basilotta (Toni Basil). It was shot in the apartment of a young curator named Jim Elliott, who lived above the merry-go-round on the Santa Monica Pier. The work can be seen as a "dance video" to Basil's song "Breakaway." Basil expressed her experience this way: "The first time I met him he did this crazy dance while holding onto a briefcase. And at the end of the dance, he let the briefcase drop and it opened up and all these marbles fell out and went all over the room. It was intense, but fun. Fun but very serious. . . . You know, we were doing serious business. I really did have the same vision as he did and since I was the vehicle, I knew I could help drive the vision."[8]

In juxtaposition to Kurz's seemingly more spontaneous performance in the Batman Gallery and her home, Basil's dance movements appear to be more choreographed, almost as a staged confrontation with the camera. Her movements, joined with Conner's, compel a comparison to the lyrics of "Maniac," the 1983 hit song by Michael Sembello from the movie *Flashdance:*

Locking rhythms to the beat of her heart
Changing movement into light
She has danced into the danger zone
When the dancer becomes the dance.

Conner shot the film at single-frame exposures as well as at 8, 16, 24, and 36 frames per second, which compounds the effect on the viewer of changing movement into light. Here Conner's movement, connected intimately to his 16mm camera, records—no, dances with—Basil. Their conjoined action is close, but again there is no direct touching.[9] The movement, the drive, the editorial process afterward turn the image into a phantom of itself.

Conner's portrayal of women in his films from the 1960s can be encapsulated through Basil's lyrics in "Breakaway," which reflect Conner's own position, as well as the woman caught in his lens:

I've got to break these chains
Before I go insane
I've got to get up and go



5



6



7

5–6 Conner during filming of VIVIAN. Photographs by Vivian Kurz

7 PAS DE TROIS, 1964/2006 (still). Filmed in 1964 by Dean Stockwell, edited in 2006 by Bruce Conner. 16mm film transferred to video, black and white, sound, 8:38 min. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

Go any place I don't know
I'm gonna break away from all the chains I find.[10]

It is here that one could, serendipitously, depict the duplicitous nature of Conner's position in relation to the women he shot—bringing us at times all too close to the subject and yet keeping us a safe (lens) distance away.

1 See "Bruce Conner—BREAKAWAY—Art + Music," MOCAtv, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CHtEASIzG8.

2 Resulting in my creating the video works *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978/79) and *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry* (1979).

3 Scientifically, a cosmic ray consists of immensely high-energy radiation, mainly originating outside the solar system and of a mysterious origin.

4 Beth Pewter, transcript of an interview conducted by Robert Conway for the Conner Family Trust, Nov. 16, 2012.

5 Originally Swinton performed by sleeping in a glass vitrine for one week, eight hours per day, as part of Cornelia Parker's 1995 retrospective *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, at the Serpentine Gallery, London.

6 "It was there for women to go in, basically," Conner said at the time. "Bruce Conner: A Discussion at the 1968 Flaherty Film Seminar," *Film Comment* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1969): 20.

7 Vivian Kurz, email to the author, Sept. 4, 2015.

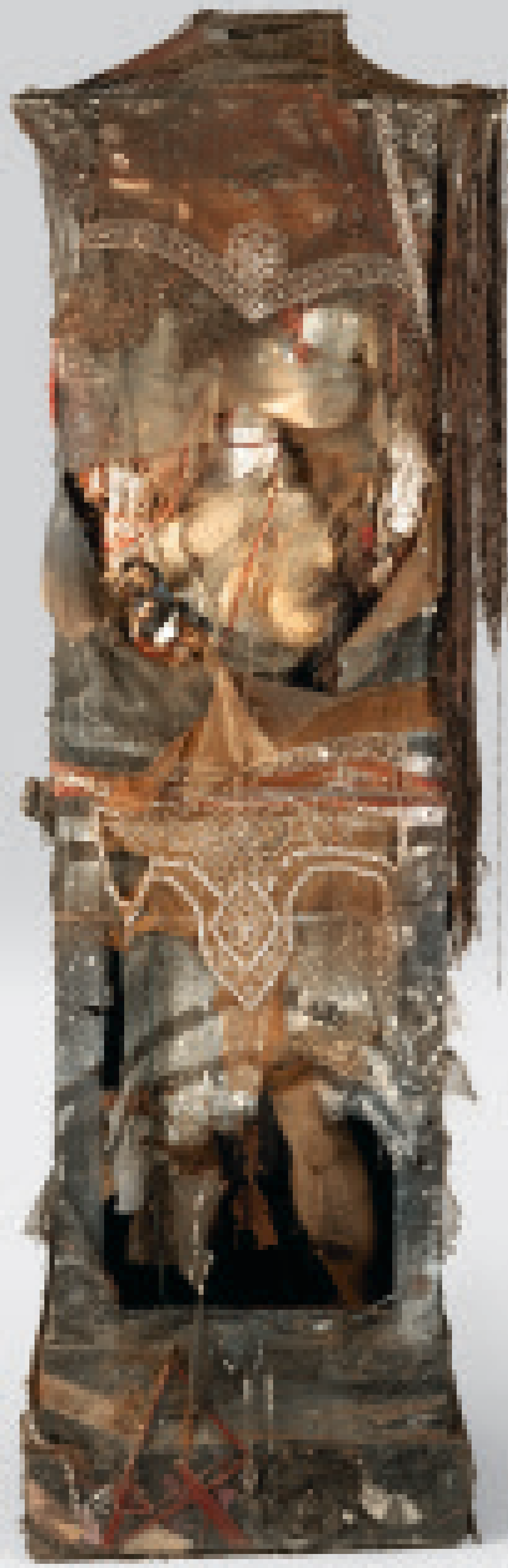
8 Toni Basil in "Bruce Conner—BREAKAWAY—Art + Music."

9 See PAS DE TROIS (1964/2006, fig. 7), http://michelle-silva.squarespace.com/new-page-4/.

10 Ed Cobb, Equinox Music, BMI.



21 **ST. VALENTINE'S DAY MASSACRE/HOMAGE TO ERROL FLYNN** 1960 Feathers, nylon, mirrors, cut and pasted printed papers, fabric, and metal tack on Masonite
19 × 14½ × 3½ in. (48.3 × 36.8 × 8.9 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Dr. and Mrs. W. William Gardner



22 **WEDNESDAY** 1960 Wood cabinet, mannequin, costume jewelry, fabric, taxidermied bird, sequins, beads, mirror, metal, yarn, wallpaper, fur, and paint
78 × 16½ × 21 in. (198.1 × 41.9 × 53.3 cm)
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, gift of Bruce and Jean Conner and Peter and Carole Selz

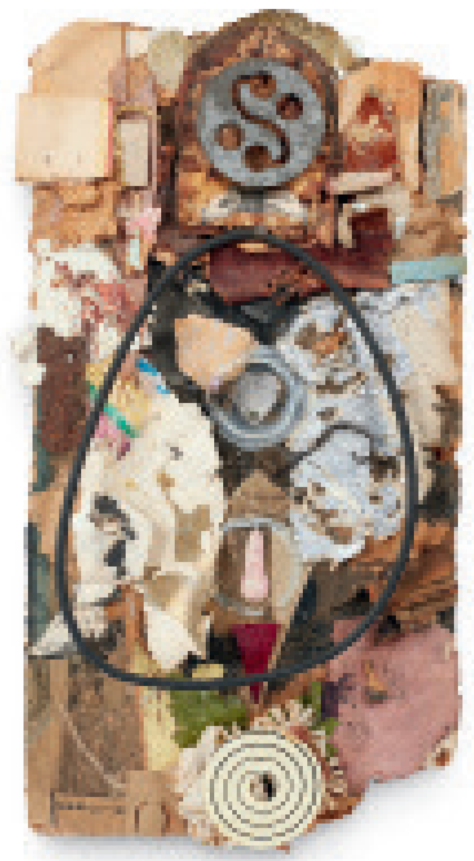


23 **HOMAGE TO MAE WEST** 1961 Lamp shade, nylon, caned chair seat, feather headpiece, cardboard, costume jewelry, tassel, twine, string, fabric, wallpaper, printed paper, and paint on board
22 × 35 × 9½ in. (55.9 × 88.9 × 24.1 cm)
Private collection, courtesy Mayor Gallery, London



24 **HOMAGE TO JEAN HARLOW** 1963 Wood, life-size photographic cutout, felt swatches, fabric, fringe, printed paper, wallpaper, costume jewelry, straw-hat fragment, sequins, metal rivets, metal wire, cellophane, and artificial flower on Masonite
61 ¾ × 18 × 3 in. (156.9 × 45.7 × 7.6 cm)
Courtesy Michael Black





25 **SWEET SIXTEEN CANDY BARRS**

February 13, 1963

Wood, cardboard, metal, paint, plastic, fabric, printed paper, string, and twine with maracas
26½ × 11 × 3 in. (67.3 × 27.9 × 7.6 cm)
Collection of Henry and Ana Pincus

26 **HEADING FOR THE LAST ROUNDUP** 1964

Paper, cardboard, metal foil, metal, glass, hair, artificial flowers, feather, string, nails, staples, and rubber tube on Masonite
12¾ × 7¼ in. (32.4 × 18.4 cm)
Collection of Robert Harshorn Shimshak and Marion Brenner





27 **LOOKING GLASS** (front and back) 1964 Mannequin arms, dried blowfish, painted wood, mirror, fringe, shoe, heart-shaped boxes, printed paper, paint, nylon, fabric, costume jewelry, beads, twine, string, doll voice speaker, fur, artificial flowers, feathers, garter clip, tinsel, metal clip, nails, tacks, staples, toy gun, and metal condom box on Masonite
60½ × 48 × 14½ in. (153.7 × 121.9 × 36.8 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of the Modern Art Council





LOOKING GLASS (top)



28 **THE TEMPTATION OF ST. BARNEY GOOGLE** 1959 Wood, nylon, fabric, Masonite, mirror, printed paper, costume jewelry, plastic doll, sequins, beads, marbles, string, broom bristles, cherry pit, postage stamp, cigarette butt, light bulb, bottle cap, metal, nails, and staples
55 × 23½ × 8¾ in. (139.7 × 59.7 × 22.2 cm)
mumok Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, former Hahn Collection, Cologne, acquired in 1978



29 **PORTRAIT OF ALLEN GINSBERG** 1960 Wood, fabric, wax, metal can, glass, feathers, metal, string, and spray paint
19 15/16 × 11 5/16 × 21 3/8 in. (50.6 × 28.7 × 54.3 cm)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase, with funds from the Contemporary Painting and Sculpture Committee

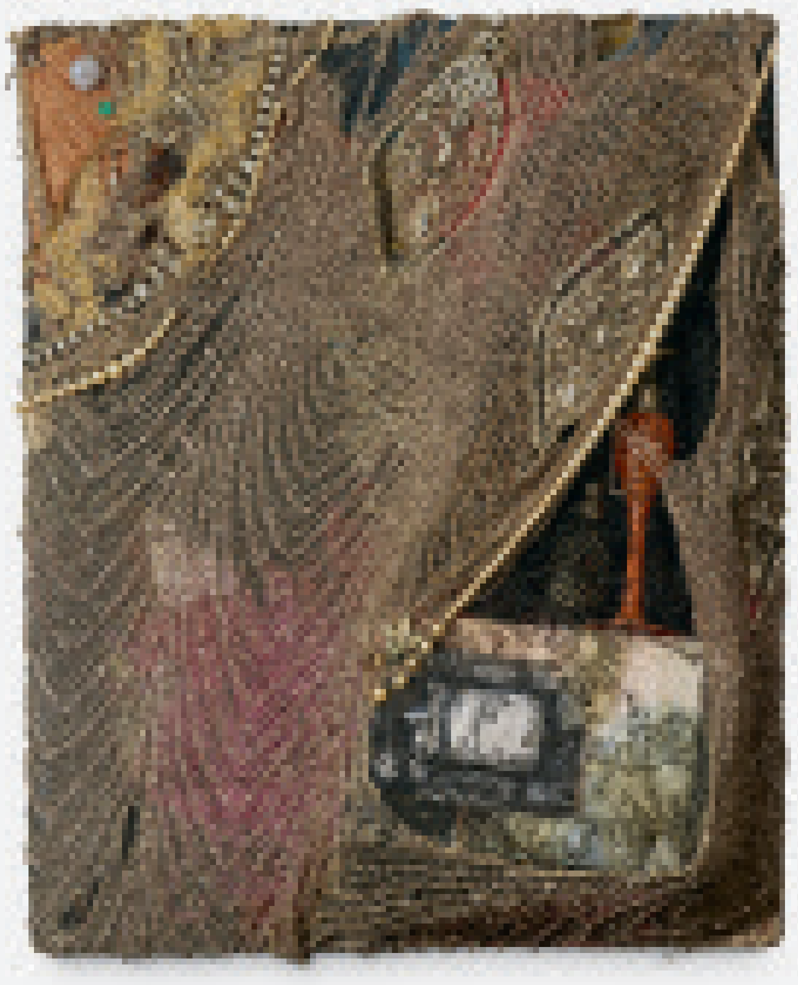




30 **THE BRIDE** (front and back) 1960 Wood, nylon, string, wax, paint, candles, costume jewelry, marbles, paper doily, nails, and staples
36½ × 17 × 23 in. (92.7 × 43.2 × 58.4 cm)
Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Braunstein/Quay Gallery and T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 1987



31 **UNTITLED** August 6, 1960 Fabric, lace, paper, metallic paper, spoon, string, yarn, twine, paint, and nails on board
10 ½ × 6 ¾ × 1 ¾ in. (26.7 × 17.2 × 4.5 cm)
Balkanski Family Collection



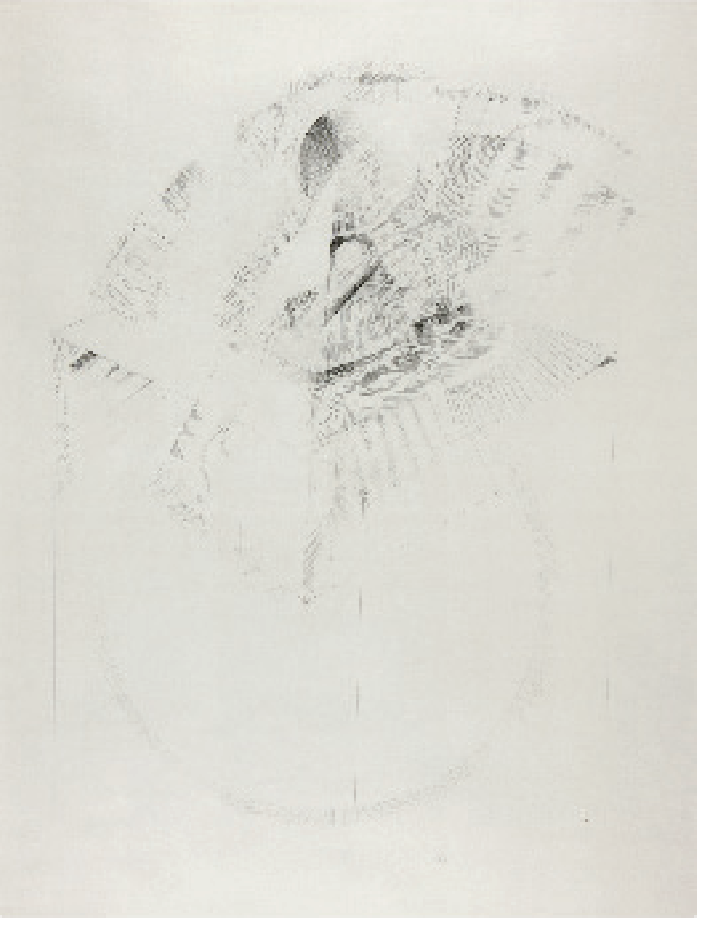
32 **UNTITLED (BEDROOM COLLAGE)** 1959–60 Beaded fabric, lace, nylon, mirror, beads, perfume bottle, gelatin silver print, wax, and string on board
25 × 21 ½ × 8 in. (63.5 × 54.6 × 20.3 cm)
Collection of Norah and Norman Stone, San Francisco



33 **SON OF THE SHEIK** 1963 Nylon stocking, nylon, lace, costume jewelry, dried grass, plastic, seeds, string, twine, wood, paint, and fur on Masonite
66 × 22 × 9¼ in. (167.6 × 55.9 × 23.5 cm)
Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, gift of Lannan Foundation, 1997



34 **SEASHELL** 1960 Graphite on paper
26 × 20 in. (66 × 50.8 cm)
Collection of Irving Stenn





35 **UNTITLED, 1205 OAK STREET, SAN FRANCISCO** 1961 Graphite on paper
25 ⅜ × 19 ⅜ in. (64.5 × 49.2 cm)
The Art Institute of Chicago, Margaret Fisher Endowment Fund

36 **HUNCHBACK** 1964 Felt-tip pen and ink on paper
23 ½ × 17 ¾ in. (59.7 × 45.1 cm)
Collection of Helen and Charles Schwab





37 **GOLGOTHA** November 6, 1963 Ink on paper
26 1/8 × 20 in. (66.4 × 50.8 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

38 **UNTITLED** November 5, 1963 Ink on paper
26 3/16 × 20 in. (66.5 × 50.8 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust



39 **MUSHROOM CLOUD, 2313 E. KELLOGG ST. WICHITA, KS** 1963 Ink on paper
20 ⅜ × 17 ¾ in. (51.8 × 45.1 cm)
Collection of Jacqueline Humphries





40 **GERYON** 1959 Paint, cardboard, wallpaper, paper, string, fabric, wire, doll head, plaster dental mold, nails, staples, and metal tack on plywood
27 ½ × 24 × 4 in. (69.9 × 61 × 10.2 cm)
Collection of Chara Schreyer

41 **CHERUB** 1959 Nylon, wax, oil, doll head, and nails on canvas
14 × 14 in. (35.6 × 35.6 cm)
Collection of Eunice and Ernest White



42 **HOMAGE TO CHESSMAN** 1960 Wood, wax, string, intercom earpiece, lead, mirror, light socket, window shade pull, wire, brass tube, doll arm, and nail
41 ¾ × 18 × 6 ½ in. (106.1 × 45.7 × 16.5 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Irving Blum



43 **DARK BROWN** 1959 Oil, shellac, fabric, costume jewelry, and aluminum paint on canvas with fur
45 5/8 × 45 3/8 × 2 in. (115.9 × 115.3 × 5.1 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Harold Zellerbach





45 **HEART/WORM/MIRROR** 1960 Wax, mirror, metal can, metal rings, string, and metallic paper on Masonite
19 × 17¾ × 4½ in. (48.3 × 45.1 × 11.4 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Bagley Wright

44 **MEDUSA** 1960 Wax, painted rubber tubing, wood, string, cardboard, synthetic hair, beads, and nylon
10 × 11 × 22⅜ in. (25.4 × 27.9 × 56.8 cm)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, gift of the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation Inc.



46 **CRUCIFIXION** 1960 Wood, wax, nylon, rope, string, nails, staples, and paint
85 × 47 × 27 ½ in. (215.9 × 119.4 × 69.9 cm)
di Rosa Collection, Napa, California



47 **RESURRECTION** 1960 Wood, wax, nylon, string, glass jar, and fabric
36 × 24 × 23 in. (91.4 × 61 × 58.4 cm)
Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Janss Jr.



48 **BLACK DAHLIA** 1960 Cut and pasted printed papers, feather, fabric, rubber tubing, razor blade, nails, tobacco, sequins, string, shell, and paint encased in nylon stocking over wood
26 ¾ × 10 ¾ × 2 ¾ in. (68 × 27.3 × 7 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, purchase

BRUCE CONNER'S BLACK DAHLIA

Greil Marcus

His assemblages, Bruce Conner decided in the late 1960s, had failed. They were supposed to move out into the world, to be completed by other people, to spread their messages and have their messages changed, but to Conner that didn't happen. He expected people to alter the pieces, add to them, without his telling anyone to do so. That was part of his pursuit of anonymity—deliberately confusing himself with other Bruce Conners, trying to keep from being photographed. He liked to go into galleries and watch people looking at his stuff—that was where the process continued. "I always thought that I would be involved with them, wherever they went," he said of his assemblages in 1992. "I thought they were alive."[1]

Some were lost, some were destroyed, and some, Conner said, were put in "detention"[2]—like CHILD (1959, pl. 50), which Philip Johnson bought at the time for $250 for the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The museum immediately locked it up and refused to put it on view. It was ugly, it was frightening, a corpse-like thing wrapped in nylon stockings and slumped in a child's high chair, actually decaying. Even Conner, when he tried, couldn't get to it. In many cases he only had photographs of the pieces, for some not even that. So when he concluded the project had failed, he tore up his photos of his assemblages and left the pieces on the street. He had found the makings of his work—doll parts, broken chairs, discarded kitchen utensils, magazines, newspapers, costume jewelry, clothes, books—on the street, and so they went back there.

He left New York, Conner said, because he would have had to regularly produce large pieces—"Roy Lichtenstein-size"—to support a half-decent life. He'd have to know how a piece would turn out before starting it. He'd be locked into repetitive work: "Can't risk, can't change. You'd live by lies: 'I'm not in it for the money—this is spiritual.' But behind it all is—*I could win the lottery.* Someone's going to win it—why not me?" In this myth, you'd wrapped yourself in a cocoon of sublimity, your mission to "devastate the consciousness of the mass murderers who control our world"—so that those mass murderers, in the face of the specter of your art, would feel "a *lack,* their spiritual vacancy," and pay money for the artist's sublimity in order to complete themselves.[3] To Conner, San Francisco was a field of freedom, where people could make their own myths, and try to live them out. But now one of Conner's myths, one of the lives he meant to lead, had come to nothing.

One of the assemblages that went missing was BLACK DAHLIA (1960, pl. 48). Conner had sent it along with others to Walter Hopps's Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles ("Iam plese send to you *Black Dahlia* Rway Xpress COD. today," Conner wrote to Hopps on a postcard with Paul Cézanne's *Le nègre Scipion* on the face: "Ho. Ho. Ho.")[4] Hopps bought it for himself; until 1992, when it was published as a two-page spread in *Artforum* ("Run it as a *Playboy* centerfold," Conner insisted[5]), it existed only as the illustration on the announcement for his 1960 show at the Batman Gallery. "I remembered the winter of '47, when the whole Elizabeth Short thing hit the papers," Hopps said in 1992, when he headed the Menil Collection in Houston, and kept BLACK DAHLIA out of sight even in his own house, hidden in his dressing room. He remembered, too, speaking with Joseph Cornell in New York in 1962: Hopps had a copy of the *Daily News* with a vicious crime story on the front page. Cornell asked to see it. He looked for a long moment. "Mr. Hopps," Hopps recalled Cornell asking "very formally," "Are you familiar with an artist named Bruce Conner?" Yes, Hopps said, of course. "Have you ever heard of a piece by Bruce Conner called BLACK DAHLIA?"[6] Hopps said he owned it; Cornell asked for color transparencies. Hopps sent them. Otherwise BLACK DAHLIA was out of the world.

"There's a process of consciousness," Conner said in 1992, "where you can assume the recognition of a true event, and then of course you speak with somebody else who experienced the same true event—or it's even documented—and one assumption is, with anything that affects everybody in our society, inevitably there'll be no agreement as to what it is. But I see this sort of mass of, symbolically, eyes, looking at itself."[7] On January 15, 1947, the naked body of Elizabeth Short, twenty-two, a drifter and would-be actress who had moved from Florida to Los Angeles the previous July, was found just off a pathway in Leimert Park. Named the Black Dahlia in the press—after the 1946 noir film *The Blue Dahlia,* starring Veronica Lake and Alan Ladd and written by Raymond Chandler—she had been cut in half at the waist, with the two halves positioned nearly two feet apart. The body—drained of blood, the intestines carefully preserved and placed under the bottom half of the corpse, with the mouth, breasts, and vagina hideously mutilated—was posed, with the legs spread and the arms placed akimbo above the head. The killer could have titled his work, but he didn't have to.

The crime and its imagery—a staged crime meant to be seen, a kind of precursor to the Los Angeles artist George Herms's 1957 *Secret Exhibition,* where he set up works in vacant lots in Hermosa Beach so that they might be seen by passersby, taken, damaged, altered, or left to rot, to merge with the elements—was, among other things, presented as an art installation. Marcel Duchamp may have mimicked it with his peekaboo *Étant donnés* (1946–66, permanently displayed in a room at the Philadelphia Museum of Art since 1969), with its naked dead woman, her head removed or obscured, the one visible arm stretched out to the side, the one visible leg spread to an almost unnatural degree, all against a patently *Mona Lisa* background, but that was a pleasant museum-shop postcard compared to the real thing.

The real thing was an image as overwhelming as it was indelible. As a crime that has never been solved, and that has thus never been explained, a crime without motive, context, or idea, it cast a permanent spell. Until the Manson murders, Los Angeles never caught up with it—"Bye-bye Black Dahlia, rest in peace Tom Ince, yes we've seen the last of those good old-time L.A. murder mysteries I'm afraid," says a cop in 1970 in Thomas Pynchon's 2009 novel *Inherent Vice*—and as the Manson murders

were solved, they were returned to history, as the Black Dahlia murder escaped it. It remains like a hole in the postwar period. It is no wonder that Chandler and Ross Macdonald and the most singular Los Angeles crime novelist to follow them, Walter Mosley, never went near it, or that James Ellroy, who tried to claim what he called "the 'noir' canon," fell flat with his *Black Dahlia* as John Gregory Dunne had done before him with *True Confessions,* with the forgettable movies based on their books shamed by the fact they tried to transcend. The imagery of the crime resists visual or literary translation. It cuts the hands off artists who try to claim it. What the killer made of Elizabeth Short cannot be translated; it can barely be described. It almost can't be seen. The combination of frenzied savagery and surgical precision removes the humanity of both the killer and the victim—what was left on the grass is beyond human. The visual fact splits the mind, making it impossible to hold the images of the severed body still—the slashed mouth and breasts, the way the killer positioned the lower half of the body so that one must look straight into the eviscerated stump of what is no longer a person but a thing—so that those images might be looked at, apprehended, understood, silenced; they can't be. What is present is what you imagine when you try to bring what was once a woman named Elizabeth Short back to the human: a scream, but the absolute scream, the dream scream where, in the face of death, you open your mouth and no sound comes out. In just this sense the scene can't be translated, and in just this sense it is the stillness of Conner's work that is the key to his success where all others have failed.

Feathers, a picture of a Japanese tattoo of a death's head in a headdress, bits of comic strips, detritus of all sorts are stuffed into the lower half of a nylon stocking, so that everything seems to float. In the upper part of the stocking, which as a whole is boxed as a rectangle, except for one part near the top that sticks out to the right, there is a photograph of a woman with short dark hair lying on her stomach, her face turned to the right, the visible right eye closed, but not in death: she looks as if she's sleeping underwater. There is, in the photo, a black belt around the middle of her naked body, and from outside it nails and studs and sequins have been pounded into her back, piling up on the left side of the piece. The bottom of Conner's BLACK DAHLIA is all visual noise; the top is absolutely quiet.

The woman in Conner's BLACK DAHLIA is not screaming. She is dreaming. She may be dreaming of her own death; soon, but from the calm, relaxed muscles in her face, not yet, she may dream that silent scream. But the piece, like the staged crime scene that inspired it, does not hold still. It floats in front of the eyes of whoever looks at it, out of focus, and it is somewhere in the back of the postwar mind, a crime that has yet to happen, a dream of vengeance, completeness, totality, the end of the world, that no one could escape and no one had to act on, though somebody did. Bruce Conner died in 2008 at seventy-four; all we can know for sure about what he intended is that, as with all of his BLACK DAHLIA's sister works, he meant others to complete it, to keep it alive.

1 Bruce Conner, conversation with the author, 1992.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Postcard from Bruce Conner to Walter Hopps, 1962, courtesy the late Walter Hopps.

5 Conner, conversation with the author, 1992.

6 Walter Hopps, conversation with the author, October 2, 1991.

7 Conner, conversation with the author, 1992.



49 **COUCH** 1963 Couch with wax, resin, shellac, paint, fabric, plaster, plant fiber, wire, doll head, glass, bottle cap, nails, hair, teeth, nylon stocking, and twine
32 × 70¾ × 27 in. (81.3 × 179.7 × 68.6 cm)
Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, California, museum purchase with funds donated by Mr. David H. Steinmetz III and an anonymous foundation



50 **CHILD** 1959 Wax, nylon, fabric, metal, twine, and wood high chair
34 ⅝ × 17 × 16 ½ in. (88 × 43.2 × 41.9 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Philip Johnson



15



16



17

15 BOMBHEAD, BAKER DAY: JULY 25, 1946, 2003. Pigmented inkjet print, ed. of 10; 21 ¾ × 19 in. (55.3 × 48.3 cm). Printed by Magnolia Editions, Oakland. Courtesy Magnolia Editions

16 LOVE OAK, 1961, printed 2004. Pigmented inkjet print, 13 × 18 ½ in. (33 × 47 cm). Printed by Magnolia Editions, Oakland. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

17 Bruce Conner swinging an assemblage with (from left), Mathias Goeritz, Antonio Souza, unknown, Souza's wife, unknown, and Jacobo Glantz, at Conner's exhibition at the Jacobo Glantz Gallery, Mexico City, February 16, 1962. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

CHILD and other works that Conner produced in black wax beginning in 1959 were expressions of his profound disillusionment with U.S. foreign and domestic policy during the Cold War, and with the nuclear arms race in particular. He had seen footage of the July 25, 1946, underwater bomb test at Bikini Atoll in a movie theater as a boy: "It was the very first image of the atomic bomb that I could observe in detail." He had found it at once "frightening" and "fascinating," an image of "immense beauty."[54] The bomb is a recurrent motif in Conner's oeuvre (fig. 15), especially in the 1976 film CROSSROADS (pl. 125), which consists entirely of declassified government footage of the underwater Bikini test explosion. In the early 1960s Conner was "running from the fear of death."[55] He devised a plan to "go to Mexico and live cheaply and hide in the mountains when the bomb dropped."[56] As a parting gesture, he painted the word *LOVE* on the street outside his building, where the word *SLOW*—warning of a nearby firehouse—had faded (fig. 16).[57]

On October 9, 1961, after a brief stay in Wichita, Bruce and Jean drove to Mexico with just one small trunk and two suitcases each.[58] With assistance from Lamantia and his wife, whom they knew from San Francisco, they found a place to live in the Juárez neighborhood of Mexico City. Life there soon proved more challenging than they had anticipated. In 1962 Conner had solo shows at the Jacobo Glantz and Antonio Souza galleries in Mexico City (fig. 17), and at Los Angeles's renowned Ferus Gallery. His sales dwindled nevertheless; he sold just one work at Ferus.[59] Several conceptual contracts from 1962 document Conner

54 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Lynn Hershman, edited by Conner, 1984, BCP, 7–8.

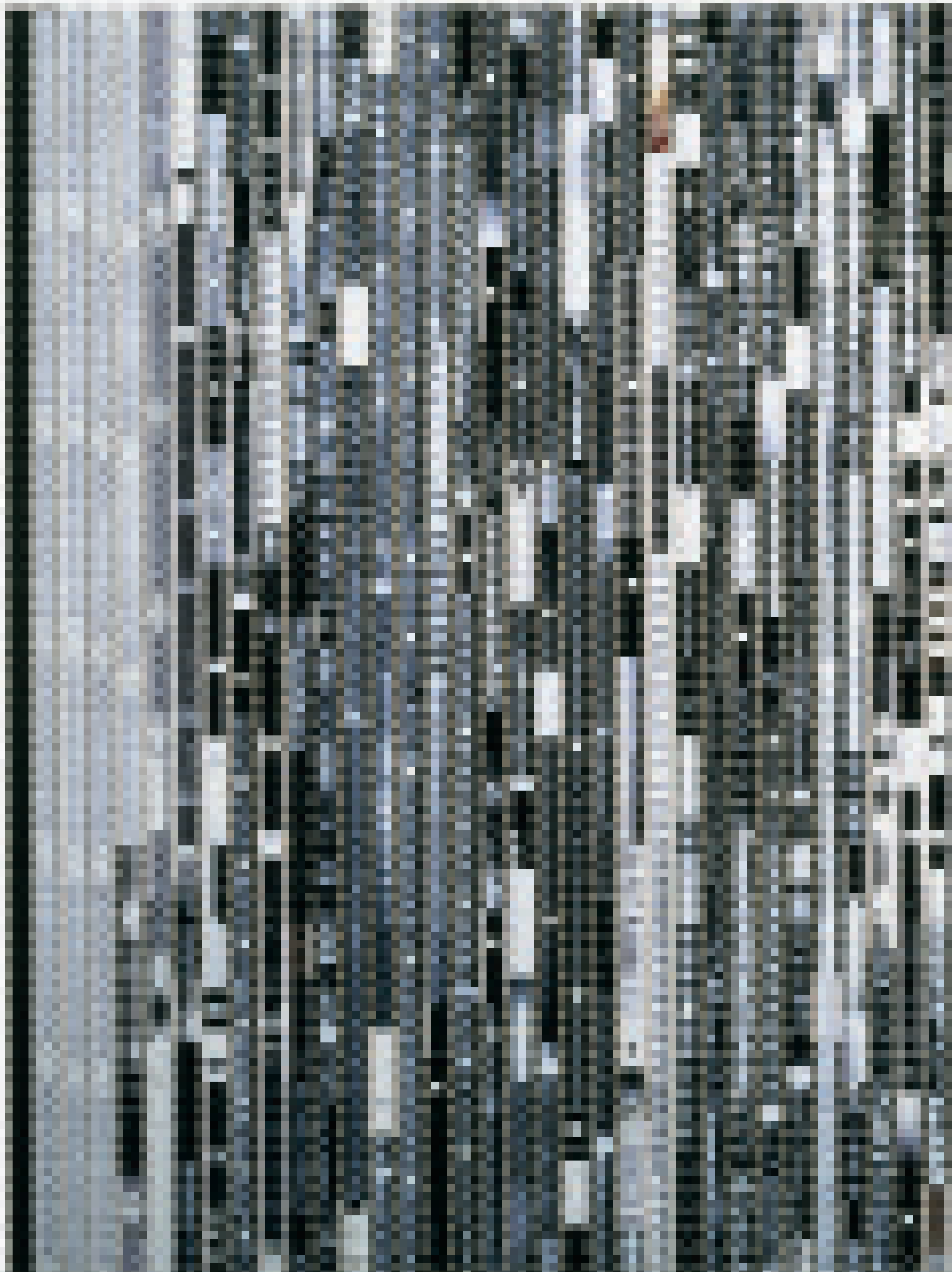
55 Letter from Bruce Conner to Michael McClure, undated (probably 1962), BCP.

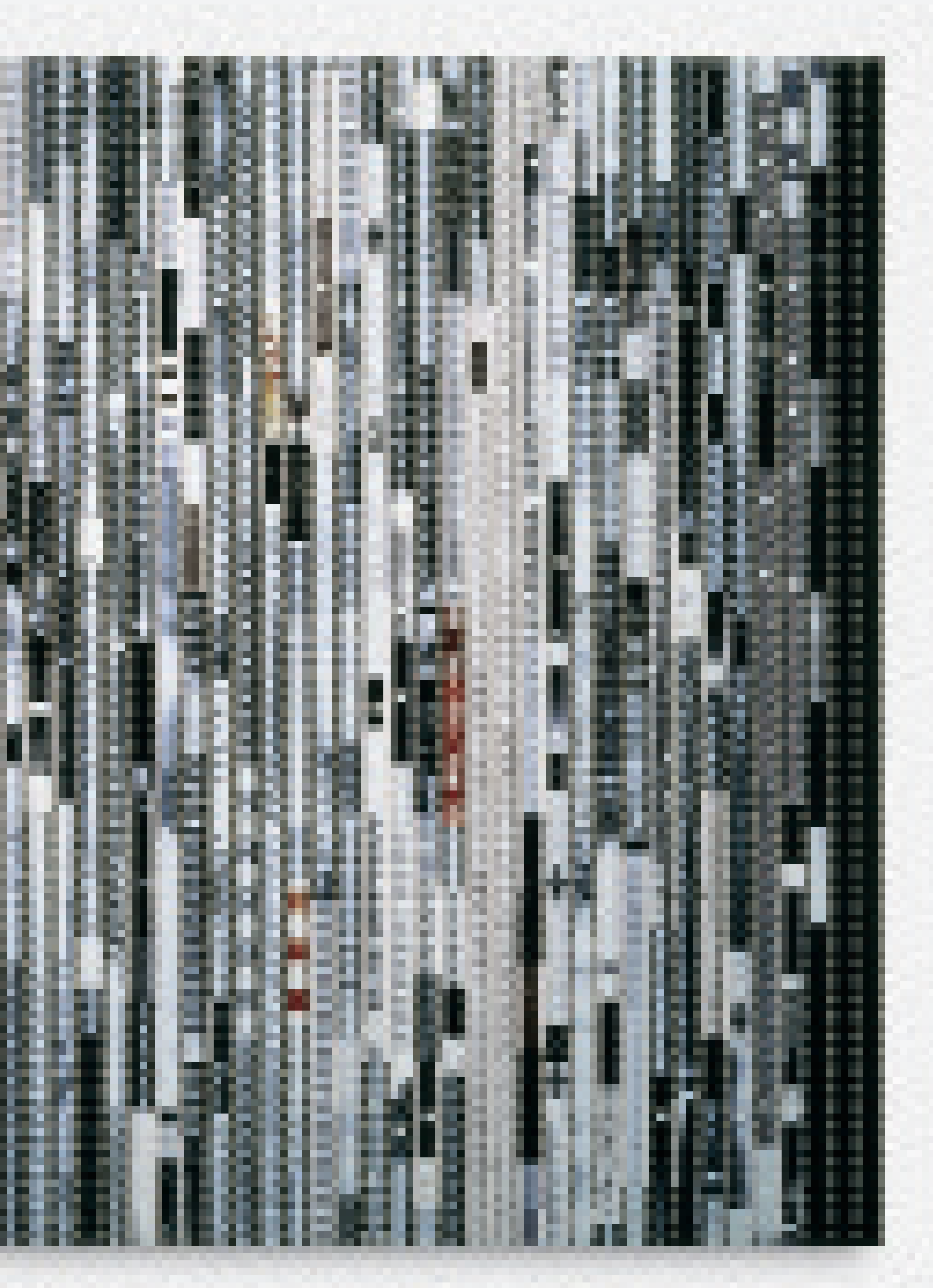
56 Conner, interview by Karlstrom, Aug. 12, 1974.

57 See Greil Marcus, "Bruce Conner: The Gnostic Strain," *Artforum* 31, no. 4 (Dec. 1992): 74–75.

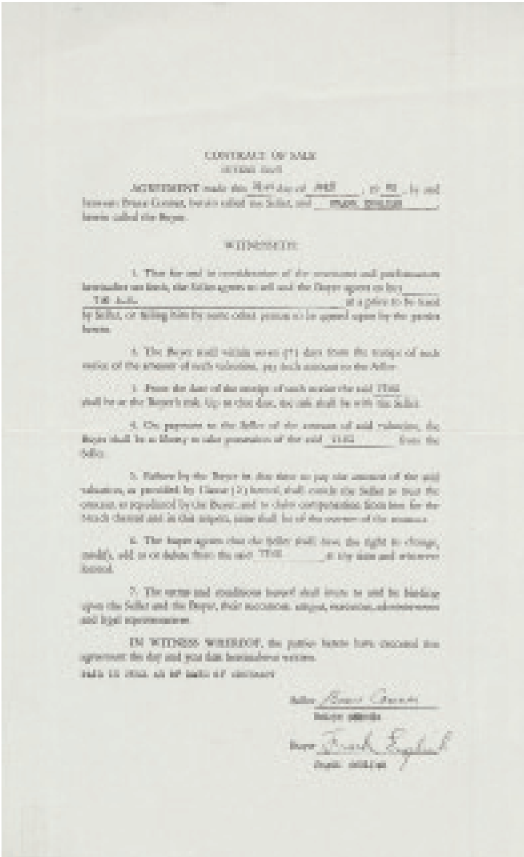
58 Letter from Nick Conner to Joan Conner, Oct. 10, 1961, BCP.

59 Conner, interview by Karlstrom, Aug. 12, 1974.





51 **COSMIC RAY** 1961 16mm color filmstrips encased in two ¼-inch Plexiglas sheets
Overall: 51 × 65 ⅞ × ½ in. (129.5 × 167.3 × 1.3 cm)
Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, gift of the artist, 2001


CONTRACT OF SALE

WITNESSETH:

18



19

18 TWO A.M., July 31, 1962. Typed letter, signed, 8 ½ × 14 in. (21.6 × 35.6 cm). Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

19 LEGAL TENDER, from the portfolio *S.M.S. No. 2*, 1968. Offset lithographs with paper band, ed. of 2,000; 31 double-sided sheets, each: 2 ¾ × 6 ¼ in. (7 × 15.9 cm). Published by The Letter Edged in Black Press Inc. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Robert and Susan Green

"selling" such intangibles as TIME, SLEEP, and PEACE to his friends (fig. 18). He also found it difficult to source materials for his assemblages in Mexico City, where discarded items were immediately scavenged from the streets.

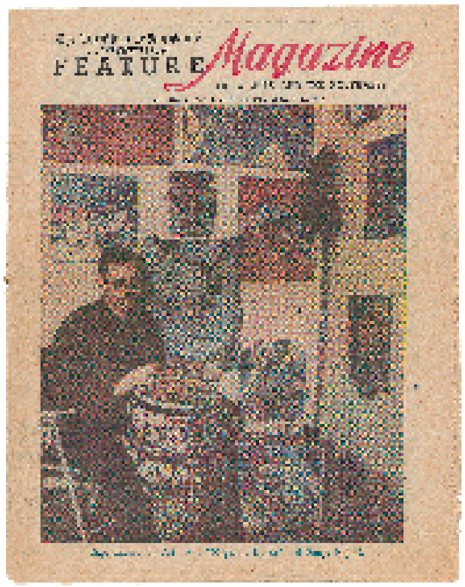
It was still a formative year for Conner, however. He became acquainted with artists Pedro Friedeberg and Mathias Goeritz; hunted for psilocybin mushrooms with Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary (pl. 62); conducted an impromptu archaeological dig with curator Walter Hopps; attended a parade in honor of visiting U.S. president John F. Kennedy and his wife, Jacqueline; and made drawings and assemblages with a formal and thematic exuberance that belied his material limitations. "It is more difficult for me to understand USA violence here. . . . I feel I have left most all the oppressive scene behind me there," he wrote to Seitz shortly after arriving.[60] He later told an interviewer, "Mexico is a wonderful place to go if you're running away from death, because they celebrate it, with bells and parades and everything else."[61]

Conner was inspired by the infusion of spirituality into even the most mundane corners of daily life in Mexico: "I would go by an auto-repair garage and in the midst of greasy tools and objects on the wall would be a shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe. A picture of the Virgin. Right next to it might be a monkey wrench, and an electric lightbulb, and plastic flowers, and a pinup of a half-naked girl. Pictures of family, souvenirs."[62] He made art out of quotidian objects, including a room partition, his conga drum, and even his shoes (pls. 63, 66, and 67).

60 Letter from Bruce Conner to William Seitz, undated (probably Dec. 1961), BCP.

61 Conner in Solnit, "Bruce Conner: The Assemblage Years," n.p.

62 Conner quoted in Peter Boswell, "Theater of Light and Shadow," in *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II*, exh. cat., ed. Boswell, Bruce Jenkins, and Joan Rothfuss (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 44.



20



21

20 Bruce Conner playing DRUM (1962, pl. 66), with GUADALUPE (1962, pl. 60, on wall), SUITCASE (1961–63, pl. 64, on floor), and other assemblages, on the cover of the *Wichita Sunday Eagle and Beacon*, February 17, 1963. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

21 BOXCAR SHOW, April 28, 1963. Gelatin silver print on postcard with printed label, 3 ½ × 5 ½ in. (8.9 × 14 cm). Collection of Steven Fama

Bruce and Jean's son, Robert, was born in Mexico on September 30, 1962; he slept not in a cradle but in a painted and collaged trunk. "[The] U.S. Government says any old box will do to put your baby in with a blanket or mattress on the bottom," he wrote to his brother.[63] Shortly after Robert's birth, though, they returned to the United States, where they settled temporarily in Wichita (fig. 20).

. . .

Conner was, by his own account, "totally penniless"[64] when he left Mexico at the end of 1962; but the following year would be eventful, with solo exhibitions at the Wichita Art Museum, the University of Chicago's Festival of the Arts, the Swetzoff Gallery in Boston, and the Batman Gallery in San Francisco. He was also awarded the San Francisco Art Institute's 1963 Nealie Sullivan Award for "outstanding contributions to contemporary sculpture."[65] He staged his own conceptual exhibition as well (fig. 21): "Near City Hall in Wichita there were railroad tracks with several boxcars parked there all the time. One boxcar has a code that says ART followed by a series of numbers. I glued a very small print of a photograph of the boxcar on a postcard with time of day and date of the BOXCAR SHOW. I traveled to New York and was not in Wichita at the designated time."[66]

63 Letter from Bruce Conner to Nick Conner (probably 1962), BCP.

64 Conner, interview by Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973.

65 San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) press release, 1963, SFAI archives, Anne Bremer Memorial Library, San Francisco.

66 Conner, interview by Boswell, Sept. 21, 1984, 1.

In spring 1963, at Timothy Leary's urging, the Conners moved from Wichita to Newton, Massachusetts, to live in the family home of Dr. Richard Alpert, Leary's colleague in the psychology department at Harvard, and others in their International Federation for Internal Freedom. Dissatisfied with the peculiar social dynamics of what was effectively a commune, they left after only three months, settling in nearby Brookline.[67] Conner later complained that he had been "stuck" in Massachusetts because he could not afford to ship his work to California.[68] Although it was a difficult time, he nevertheless managed to produce art of extraordinary beauty and conceptual rigor while living there.

Drawing became a primary focus during this period, as Conner transitioned from the tentative lines of his Mexico drawings to a dense allover style, aided by his discovery of Pentel felt-tip pens. He embarked on an ambitious series in which mandalas function "as an ordering principle, a calm and impassive foil to the riot of marks flooding the rest of the sheet" (pls. 100–112 and 114).[69] Lacking a sympathetic cohort of visual artists in the Boston area, Conner turned to the local music scene, participating in performances of scores by La Monte Young and John Cage and befriending members of the Jim Kweskin Jug Band.[70] Geoff Muldaur, a founding member of the band, remembers "a throwing off of convention in the Cambridge folk scene" that was attractive to Conner, who would sometimes bring his audio recording equipment onto the stage at concerts.[71] Although not a trained musician, Conner played harmonica (Muldaur jokes that he "flailed about" on it[72]) and composed his own conceptual scores (pls. 53–55). Music would remain a lifelong passion for Conner; he would later say that he typically listened to music five or six hours a day.[73]

While Conner shared in the nation's despair at the assassination of John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963, he was equally disturbed by the media response, which he felt obscured the president's humanity and transformed him into a cipher onto which the nation could project its collective anxieties and ideals. His disillusionment was heightened when he discovered himself alone at the president's birthplace in Brookline on May 29, 1964—what would have been Kennedy's forty-seventh birthday. Crowds had flocked to Kennedy's grave at Arlington National Cemetery and to the site of his murder in Dallas but Brookline had few visitors. Conner said: "It corroborated my impression that everyone was celebrating his death, certainly not his birthday. . . . You can hear the crowd cheering at the bullfight. It's either the matador is gored or the bull is being killed by the matador . . . and everybody's having a great time celebrating this event."[74] This violent imagery made its way into REPORT (pl. 84), a film about Kennedy's assassination that Conner worked on for several years beginning in 1963, ultimately producing eight different versions.[75] He struggled with the project, convinced that once he completed it he would have participated in the kind of

67 Jean Conner discusses the experience in detail in her interviews with Robert Conway, 23–25.

68 Conner, interview by Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973.

69 Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner*, 228.

70 Jean Conner in Gerald Matt, "Jean Conner in Conversation with Gerald Matt," in *Bruce Conner: The 70s*, exh. cat., ed. Gerald Matt and Barbara Steffen (Nuremberg: Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2011), 151.

71 Geoff Muldaur, telephone conversation with the author, Aug. 27, 2015. Muldaur remained close with Conner and played at his "50 Years in Show Business" party.

72 Ibid.

73 Bruce Conner in Scott MacDonald, "I Don't Go to the Movies Anymore: An Interview with Bruce Conner," *Afterimage* 10, nos. 1–2 (Summer 1982): 22. Musician and collaborator Patrick Gleeson says, "I didn't have anyone else who was that good a listener." Patrick Gleeson, telephone conversation with the author, Oct. 16, 2013. Michelle Silva, Conner's film editor in his final years, recalls that he would "brag about his iTunes library. He said, 'I can listen to my iTunes library for twenty-eight days without hearing a single song repeated.'" Michelle Silva, interview conducted by the author and Rudolf Frieling, May 14, 2014, Los Angeles.

74 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Nancy Richards, Apr. 22, 1985, Boulder, Colorado, BCP, 2.

75 For a compelling analysis of the film in relation to "assassination critics" (those who question the official narrative of the Kennedy assassination), see Art Simon, *Dangerous Knowledge: The JFK Assassination in Art and Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 131–44.



22

22 *The Last Supper* numbered oil painting set, from the same edition used by Bruce Conner for BLUE PLATE/SPECIAL (1964, pl. 82). Collection of Robert Harshorn Shimshak and Marion Brenner

exploitation that he condemned, and Kennedy would be "as dead as they had made him."[76] Brakhage described REPORT as "a masterpiece, . . . one of the craziest doors I've ever been blessed to open."[77]

Conner produced several conceptual projects in response to the assassination as well, all expressions of what might appropriately be termed an identity crisis. Immediately following the revelation that "everyone was celebrating [Kennedy's] death," he created BLUE PLATE/SPECIAL (1964, pl. 82), a painting based on Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (1495–98) and completed with total fidelity to a paint-by-numbers kit (fig. 22) he procured from a hobby shop near Kennedy's birthplace (save for several black drips at Matthew's sleeve). "I had abdicated my ego," he later told an interviewer. "I was going through a process of testing and acting as if I did not exist as an ego."[78] In a 1965 letter to McClure, he wrote: "I have a feeling of death from the 'recognition' I have been receiving . . . Ford Grant,[79] shows, reviews, interviews, prizes . . . I feel like I am being cataloged and filed away and I have a refusal to produce something by which I will be 'recognized.' I am embarrassed that I exist. I feel like it is an imposition for people to insist on saying that I am Bruce Conner. I have the right not to be Bruce Conner?"[80] Conner had long worried about the effects of professional recognition. As early as 1955, he wrote to Charles Alan, "The position that I'm now in kind of frightens me. Previously I had no thought of an audience for my paintings. Now, with the prospect of my paintings being exhibited in a gallery and sold, I feel a responsibility towards the people who will be seeing my paintings and towards you."[81]

In response to these concerns, which he felt acutely in 1963–64, Conner embarked on a search for Bruce Conner. He said: "Jean's mother sent us a clipping from a Lincoln, Nebraska, newspaper announcing the birth of a Bruce Conner. This was of 'high significance' to me, especially when psychically on edge, energetically involved in mystical philosophies, psychedelics, concepts of being reborn, multiplicity of personalities, and transmigration of souls. Obviously something was going on." Following the dictum that "artists are encouraged to find themselves," he located other Bruce Conners through telephone directories and briefly considered convening a Bruce Conner convention at a Holiday Inn.[82] Instead, he sent

76 Bruce Conner in "Bruce Conner: A Discussion at the 1968 Flaherty Film Seminar," *Film Comment* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1969): 18.

77 Letter from Stan Brakhage to Bruce Conner, May 29, 1972, BCP.

78 Bruce Conner, interviewed by Robert Shimshak, June 15, 1991, edited by Conner, BCP, 4. Conner insisted that the kit's reference diagram be framed behind glass above the completed painting.

79 Conner was among a dozen filmmakers to win a Ford Foundation grant for independent film production—the foundation's first and only grant of this kind—in 1964. He was ambivalent about his newfound success as a filmmaker: "They gave me a film grant and all I had made was sixteen minutes of movies." Suddenly "instead of being an artist that had made a couple of short films, I became a filmmaker who dabbled in the arts." Conner, interview by Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973.

80 Letter from Bruce Conner to Michael McClure, Oct. 22, 1965, BCP.

81 Letter from Bruce Conner to Charles Alan, Aug. 13, 1955, Alan Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

82 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Peter Boswell, Sept. 1, 1985, part 2, Walker Art Center Archives, Minneapolis, 10.



23



24



25

23 I AM BRUCE CONNER, 1964, reissued 1967. Metal pin-back button, diameter: 1 ¼ in. (3.2 cm). Courtesy Conner Family Trust

24 I AM NOT BRUCE CONNER, 1964, reissued 1967. Metal pin-back button, diameter: 1 ¼ in. (3.2 cm). Courtesy Conner Family Trust

25 TOUCH/DO NOT TOUCH (1964, pl. 83), partial installation view at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1999

Christmas cards to all of the Bruce Conners he had found, enclosing two buttons, one reading "I AM BRUCE CONNER," the other, "I AM NOT BRUCE CONNER" (figs. 23 and 24). Each return address belonged to a different Bruce Conner.

Closely related to BLUE PLATE/SPECIAL and to the unrealized Bruce Conner convention is TOUCH/DO NOT TOUCH (1964, fig. 25 and pl. 83), an installation consisting of thirteen preprimed canvases, all with transfer lettering. Twelve of the panels, made by artist and fellow Wichitan John Pearson, read "DO NOT TOUCH," and one, made by Conner himself, reads "TOUCH." Only the latter is presented behind glass, frustrating any effort to execute its imperative.[83] The idea for the decidedly nontactile work was born when Conner observed that his fur-lined painting DARK BROWN (1959, pl. 43) was the only work on view at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [SFMOMA]) with a label instructing, "Do not touch."[84] Conner in retrospect said that he had "resolved definitely during that month when these thirteen canvases were being completed that I was going to stop making assemblages."[85] He concluded his assemblage practice with the extravagant LOOKING GLASS (1964, pl. 27), after which he "stopped gluing big chunks of the world in place."[86]

Narrative chronology continues on page 122

83 Conner first exhibited this work in a symbolic three-day show held at the Batman Gallery (Aug. 11–13, 1964). "Three days is a traditional length for many rituals," he once pointed out. Conner, interview by Rothfuss, Nov. 14, 1997, 28. See Gary Garrels, "Soul Stirrer: Visions and Realities of Bruce Conner," in this volume.

84 Conner's distress was probably exacerbated by his discovery that McClure, to whom he had given the painting in recognition of the poet's love of tactile things, had sold the work. Conner, interview by Karlstrom, Aug. 12, 1974.

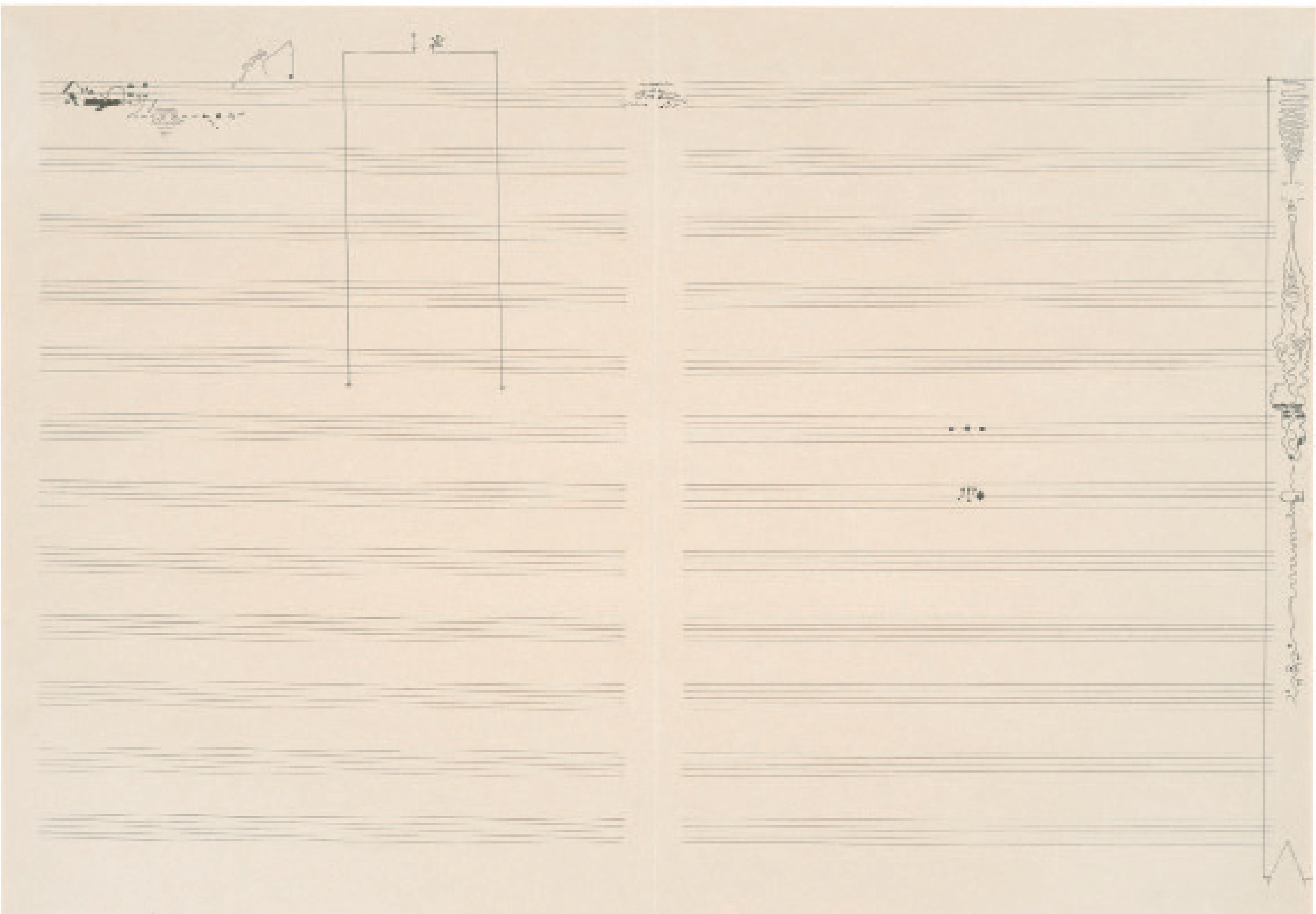
85 Conner, interview by Rothfuss, Nov. 14, 1997, 28–29. Conner also saw a connection between TOUCH/DO NOT TOUCH and Jay DeFeo's *The Rose* (1958–66), which resided in her studio one block north of the Batman Gallery. It was significant, he said, that one looked toward the sunset in the west when viewing DeFeo's painting, while his installation at Batman faced sunrise in the east. "Consider that the room with The Rose was like a temple. TOUCH/DO NOT TOUCH was a temple facing the east." Fax from Bruce Conner to Joan Rothfuss, Jan. 31, 1998, BCP. Elsewhere he described DeFeo's mandala-like painting as if it were a compass: "[It] was not only a centering emblem to Jay. It became a basic reference point for myself and many others. A reference point from which it was possible to gauge everything else." His seventy-two-hour exhibition at the Batman Gallery "was partially conceived and structured in relation to [DeFeo's studio at] 2322 Fillmore." Bruce Conner, "The Rose: Eulogy as well as a proposal that the Rose be seen in a different light," 2004, BCP.

86 Bruce Conner in Hans Ulrich Obrist and Gunnar B. Kvaran, "Interview: Bruce Conner," *Domus*, no. 885 (Oct. 2005): 23.

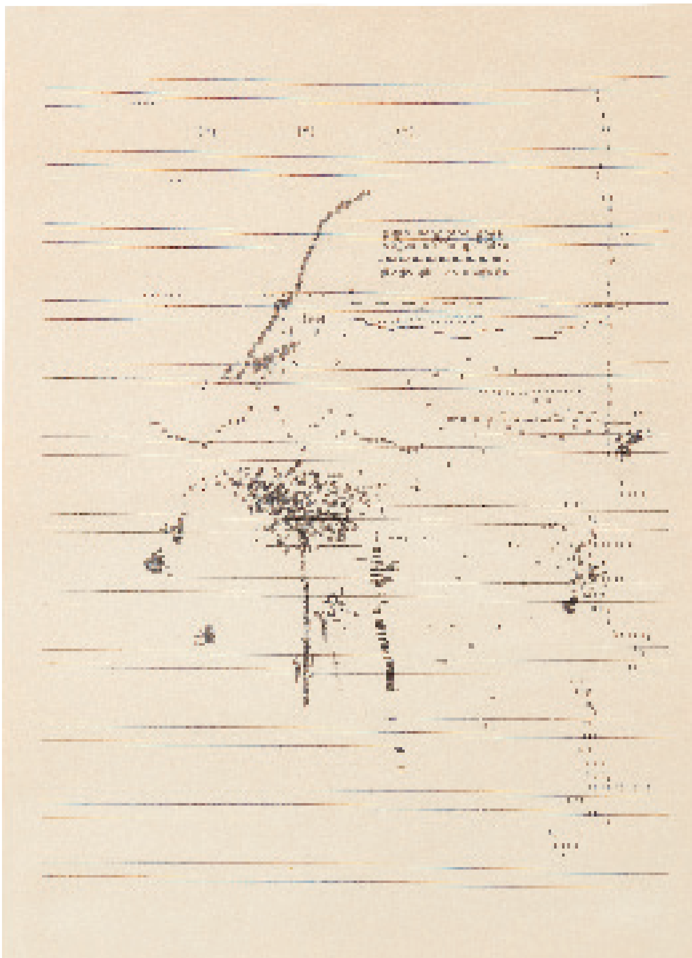




52 **MUSIC** (closed and open) 1960 Ink, paint, wax, cut and pasted papers, postage stamps, string, thread, paper tags, filmstrips, adhesive tape, metal, and adhesive bandage on music paper mounted on painted board with velvet cover
21 5/8 × 11 1/2 in. (54.9 × 29.2 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Mary Heath Keesling



53 **LARGE MUSIC PAGE #2** 1962 Ink on music paper
12 7/8 × 18 1/2 in. (32.7 × 47 cm)
Courtesy The Jay DeFeo Trust





54 **TYPEWRITER DRAWING** ca. 1961 Ink on music paper
11¾ × 9¼ in. (29.9 × 23.5 cm)
Collection of Robert Harshorn Shimshak and Marion Brenner

55 **UNTITLED (MUSIC)** 1963 Ink on music paper
13 × 9¼ in. (33 × 23.5 cm)
Collection of Gordon VeneKlasen

FOLLOWING PAGE: 56 **TICK-TOCK JELLY CLOCK COSMOTRON** 1961 Wall component: wood, fabric, cardboard, wallpaper, magazine pages, stickers, string, twine, plastic film, glass fragments, mirror fragments, iron straps, grommets, nails, screws, upholstery tacks, metal foil, aluminum sheet, electrical socket, electrical wiring, rubber hose, beads, costume jewelry parts, sequins, ribbon, nylon stocking, cigarette filter, paint, graphite, bitumen, and resin on pressed hardboard; painted wood frame with mirror segments. Floor component: wood spool, fiberboard cone, paper, paint, monofilament netting, electrical plug, insulated wire, speaker, audio cable, iron wire, rings and clips, paper, yarn, and twine. 5-inch reel of half-track monaural tape transferred to digital files.
Wall component: 57½ × 53¾ × 5 in. (146.1 × 136.5 × 12.7 cm); cone: 43¾ in. × 15 in. diameter (111.1 cm × 38.1 cm diameter)
The Art Institute of Chicago, restricted gift of Janss Foundation, Twentieth-Century Purchase Fund



A SERIES OF PARALLEL GESTURES

Kevin Beasley

If two people, in an exchange of sentiment, strive to find common ground, they must assume that both will bring their passions to the table. They might wear their deepest sentiments on their sleeves, but each must first notice the other's sleeve, which means breaking eye contact. Relegated to their bodies, and relying on a mental catalogue of historical (and often political) knowledge and social signifiers of current relevancy, they must reconcile what is truly at stake and how they must proceed. What context shapes one's decisions? In what context are they born? Who bears witness, and who can disseminate such experiences to others?

I never met Bruce Conner, and I can't say I was aware of his singular approach and adventurous questioning before he died, but I imagine that those who encountered him couldn't take their eyes off him, if witnessing was ever so important to "tomfoolery."[1] I've read many stories about Conner and have had conversations about him with others, among them the organizers of this exhibition and people who worked with him. All declare Conner's approach as expansive as it was difficult, particularly because he pushed against institutions more than he worked with them. To understand him is to wrangle with not just an eccentric personality but one mired in questions and shrouded in meandering inquiry: the perfect subject of a non-retrospective. He produced a type of fruit we know can be consumed, but in order to reap its benefits we must proceed with care and full attentiveness. What can possibly happen when we take our eyes off such a rigorous mind? We emerge in the middle, as has been my experience: his impression has already been made on me and is coming further into focus. Conner's elusiveness has resulted in an amount of documentation disproportionate to his prolific body of work. A contemporary of Jay DeFeo, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg (he has been associated with all three), he escaped the textbook-style monographic productions of an artist of his kind. Of the many pivot points within Conner's approach, his penchant for escaping definition defines him the most.

This is very important—dire—to an artist. To be situated within a cyclical encasement that seeks to pin your every breath, your gesture, and your accumulated spilling, you exit a name. I was once told that by developing a methodology an artist can understand the way in which they approach production. It wasn't until I resisted that methodology that I could understand the importance of defining principles that continuously question formulaic approaches. What does one call this? A methodology before the method? Yet it produces a feedback loop. I have come to recognize that an artist's sanity can be found within a methodology of slippages that not only embraces "against-the-grain" tactics but survives off them, that finds a harmony within that loop of noise and paradoxical existence. Conner's installation TOUCH/DO NOT TOUCH (1964, pl. 83 and p. 90)[2] represents the paradox of being expected to catch the viewer off guard, subverting expectations of an artist who forged a reputation for work filled with surprises. It takes a keen awareness of one's position—the reading of the other's sleeve—to navigate and challenge established ways of doing things, not only for play but out of urgent necessity. You must look away at some point; for example, to resist settling in New York and instead pioneer a generation of artists in San Francisco that would enliven Western poetry, art, and filmmaking in the 1960s and 1970s, as Conner did.

Unpacking the relationship of Conner's practice to its disparate parts and their complicated psychological inner workings demands a certain kind of understanding, but I find it more revealing to recognize the significance of a series of parallel gestures that usurp what one can speak about. How does attaching a handle to a painting, as in RATBASTARD (1958, pl. 10), upset one's notion of purpose? Very little about Conner's approach suggests practicality, but the logic driving his decisions is sharp and deeply considered. The taking down of an object is just as important as the hanging on a nail of another (or even the same object in another chapter of life), a bend at the knees. Sedimented, embedded parts act as collagen; they are revealed in their glue, liquefying all over again. Conner was a kind of purpose maker who never possessed, created, or embodied a dull moment without intention. As confounding as the purpose may be, it is razor sharp. It can sting, in all its wit.

A liveness resonates within an object of Conner's due to its organic nature and handling of materials. In time even the classics morph, yet we are only able to understand a work's life span relative to our degree of ignorance. What to do with an accumulation of wire, string, monofilament netting, and cardboard? The substrates of multiple armatures kinked and knotted together to describe a cone. A conic means for playback and even more obscure as a support for a picture plane of paperboard. Painted with a virtue possessed by its economy of means and a rigor for precision. Precisely nonfunctional even as one would intend it to be otherwise. TICK-TOCK JELLY CLOCK COSMOTRON (1961, pl. 56) never played its audience as designed. Instead, a composition of tape signals punctuated with granular textures, distorted transmissions, and residual machine noise stands in as playback audio. His marks reside in every corner, multilayered within each stab and dirty enough to challenge even the likes of Pierre Schaeffer, the father of musique concrète. In hearing how Conner arranges his sounds, one can first mistake the seemingly harsh misses in audio as a sort of malfunction of a tired device, but with more time one hears a cadence of ghosts, snippets, and utterances sprinkled craftily throughout. Although the original recording device never worked, the sculpture remains—a processor of signals, marks, and gestures unrecognizable from its source. Yet it begs the question: what is being recorded in these series of marks and makers who make presence urgent? It plays as Conner did, and it plays something quite morose but mysteriously prescient: a mere moment in time, yet again rich—and thoroughly piled.

1 Kevin Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 9.

2 See Rachel Federman, "Bruce Conner: Fifty Years in Show Business—A Narrative Chronology," in this volume.





57 **DRAWING WITH THORNS** 1962 Ink on paper mounted on board with string and thorn branch
8 ¾ × 6 in. (22.2 × 15.2 cm)
Collection of Sir John Richardson

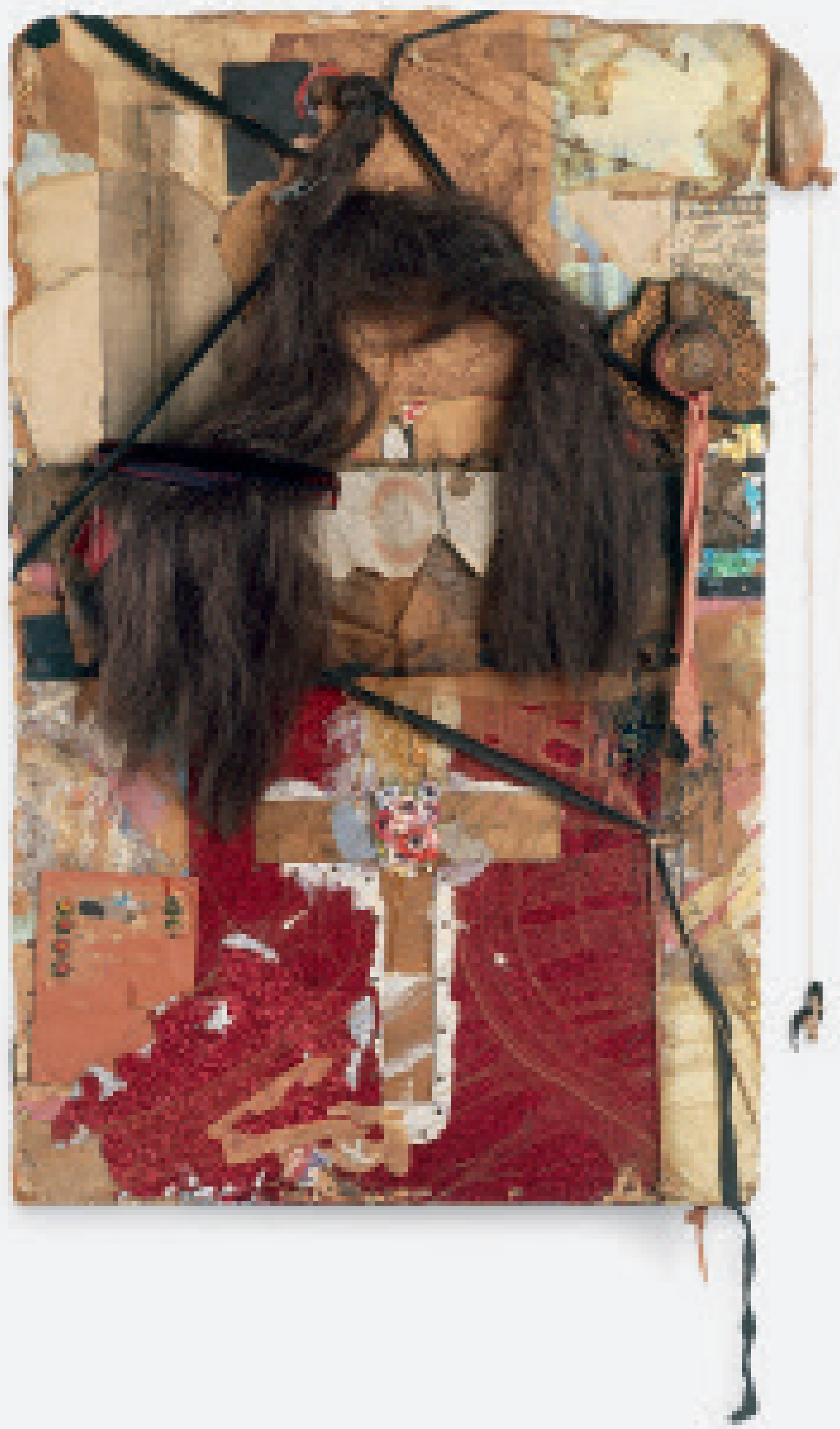
58 **ANNUNCIATION** 1961 Printed and colored papers, decorative foil, screenprinted mirror fragments, velvet-wrapped buttons, metal trinkets, and cellophane on Masonite
14 × 15 ⅞ in. (35.6 × 40.3 cm)
Princeton University Art Museum, New Jersey, lent by the Leonard Brown Family Collection



59 **CROSS** 1962 Wood, nylon, fabric, gelatin silver print, cardboard, string, thorns, nails, metal rivets, water canteen, ceramic, feather, and candle
37 × 19½ × 14 in. (94 × 49.5 × 35.6 cm)
Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, California, gift of the LAM Contemporary Collectors Council with support from the National Endowment for the Arts



60 **GUADALUPE** 1962 Fabric, printed paper, plastic, fur, beaded necklaces, studded belt, paper, string, twine, prayer cards, nails, wax, and paint on Masonite
27 × 20 × 5 in. (68.6 × 50.8 × 12.7 cm)
Balkanski Family Collection



61 **SENORITA** 1962 Hair, comb, metal clip, bobby pins, metal lamp base, wax, nylon, paper, metal foil, metal sheets, ribbon, fabric, lace, tinsel, string, thread, tissue with lipstick print, newsprint, and nails on board mounted on wood
34 × 23½ × 6½ in. (86.4 × 59.7 × 16.5 cm)
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, purchased with funds provided by LLWW Foundation

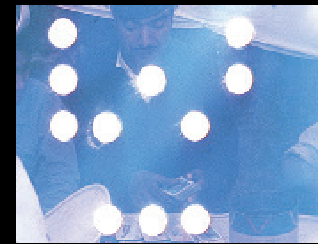
FOLLOWING PAGES: 62 **LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS** (long version) 1959–67/1996 16mm film, color, sound, 14:30 min.
Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (Accessions Committee Fund purchase) and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, with the generous support of the New Art Trust




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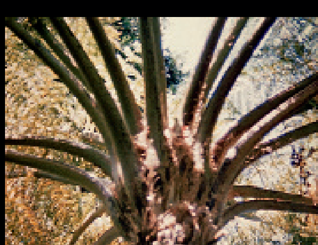














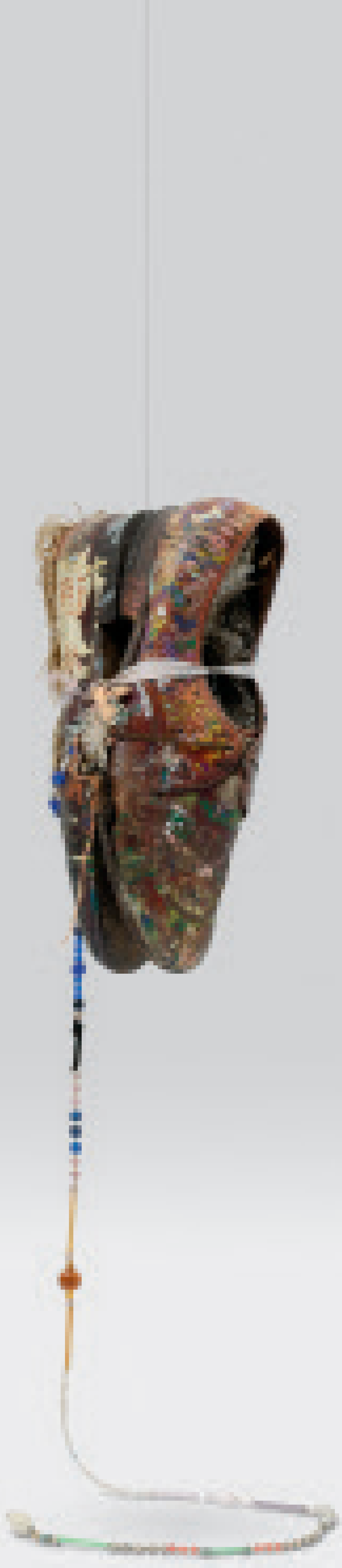








STOP



63 **SHOES** 1961–62 Shoes with beads, fringe, snakeskin, fur, fabric, gold leaf, and paint
Shoe size: 10½ D
Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody



64 **SUITCASE** 1961–63 Suitcase with metal closures, paper, fabric, beads, fringe, candles, trading stamps, mirror, half of a yo-yo, fur, gold and silver foil, paint, and graphite
22 × 24 × 9 in. (55.9 × 61 × 22.9 cm)
Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation, Los Angeles



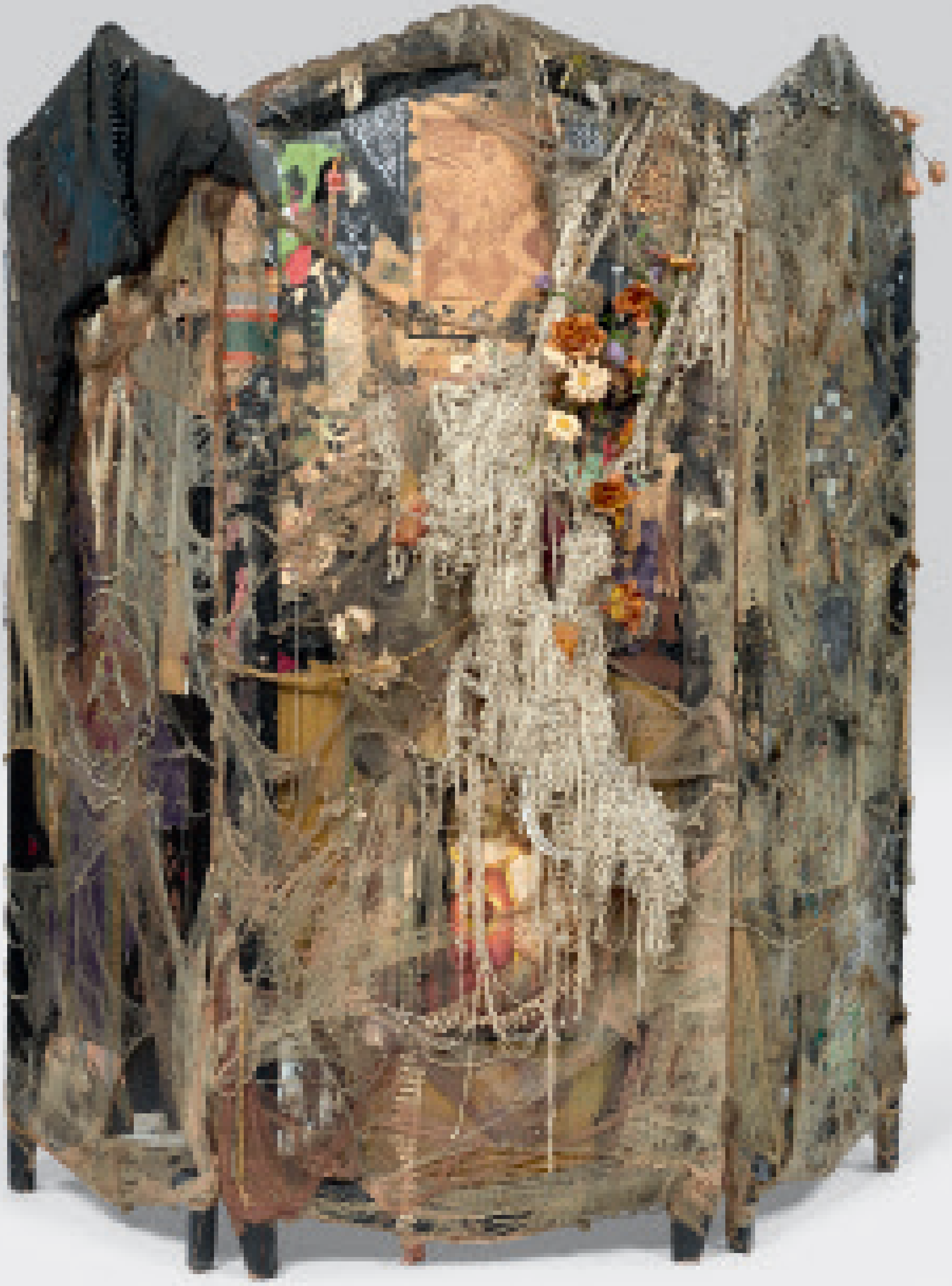


65 **PILLOW** (front and back) 1961–64 Pillow with paint and cut and pasted printed papers
4 × 27 × 17 in. (10.2 × 68.6 × 43.2 cm)
di Rosa Collection, Napa, California



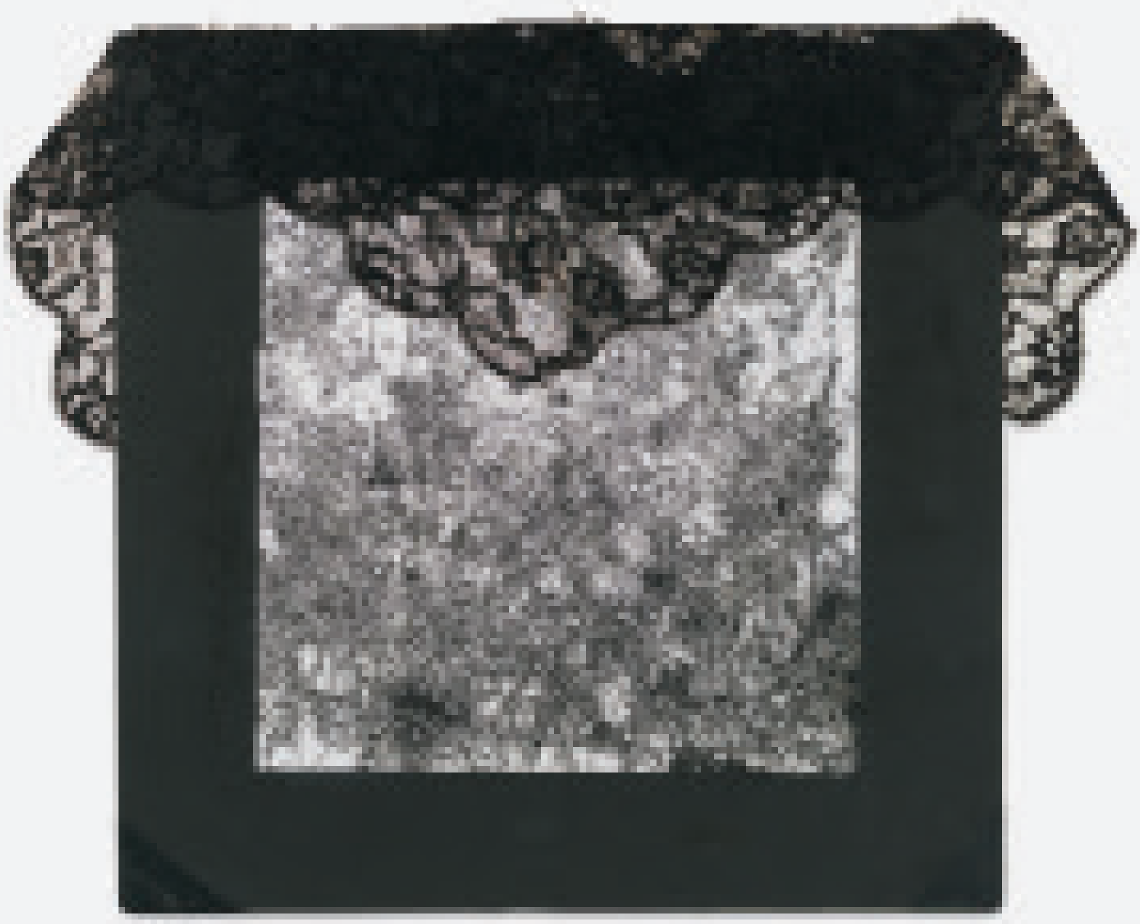


66 **DRUM** (side and top) 1962 Drum with ink, paint, lace, twine, yarn, string, beads, costume jewelry, and fabric
30 × 11½ × 11½ in. (76.2 × 29.2 × 29.2 cm)
Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody





67 **PARTITION** (front and back) 1961–63 Wood partition with nylon, fringe, costume jewelry, artificial flowers, fabric, paint, string, straw-hat fragment, metal, mirrors, maraca, paper collage, paper, feathers, metal foil, wax, and tinsel
Three panels, each: 71 5/8 × 29 in. (181.9 × 73.7 cm)
Musée national d'art moderne/Centre de création industrielle, Centre Pompidou, Paris



68 **DRAWING WITH MANTILLA** 1956–61 Collage of etching, lace, mirror, tape, and thread, and pen and ink on board
20 × 25¾ in. (50.8 × 65.4 cm)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee



69 **EAGLES NEST (LE BOUQUET DU NID DE L'AIGLE)** 1962

Fabric, acrylic paint, cellophane, string, printed paper, straw, corn husk, flower petals, and ink on Masonite in artist's found frame

24½ × 22¼ × 1½ in. (62.2 × 56.5 × 3.8 cm)

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, purchase through a gift of Albert M. Bender



70 **MEXICO COLLAGE** 1962 Netting, paper, paint, ink stamps, fringe, bell, and costume jewelry on Masonite
23 × 32 × 5 in. (58.4 × 81.3 × 12.7 cm)
di Rosa Collection, Napa, California



71 PICNIC ON THE GRASS 1962 Paper, plastic, fabric, metal, string, gouache, and acorn on Masonite
16¼ × 13½ in. (41.3 × 34.3 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy



72 **UNTITLED** 1961 Ink on paper
25 × 19½ in. (63.5 × 49.5 cm)
Collection of Alexandra Munroe



73 **HOLY MUSHROOM** May 21, 1962 Ink on paper
25 5/8 × 19 7/8 in. (65.1 × 50.5 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust





74 **UNTITLED** 1962 Ink on paper
12 × 8 7/8 in. (30.5 × 22.5 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust

75 **SKETCH FOR RELIEF SCULPTURE, CALLE NAPOLES 77-4, MEXICO CITY, MEXICO** November 29, 1961 Graphite on paper
9 9/16 × 10 in. (24.3 × 25.4 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



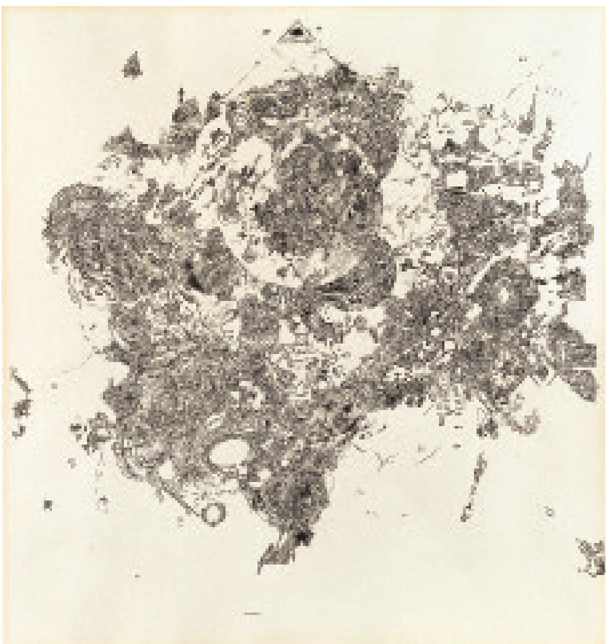
76 **CROSS** 1961 Graphite on paper
13 × 10 in. (33 × 25.4 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York





77 **MUSHROOM** September 2, 1962 Graphite on paper
20½ × 14¹³⁄₁₆ in. (52.1 × 37.6 cm)
Private collection

78 **BURNING BUSH (C)** September 3, 1962 Ink on paper
25⅝ × 19⅞ in. (65.1 × 50.5 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase





80 **UNTITLED** September 3, 1962 Ink on paper
25 5/8 × 19 7/8 in. (65.1 × 50.5 cm)
The Art of Emprise, Emprise Bank, Wichita, Kansas

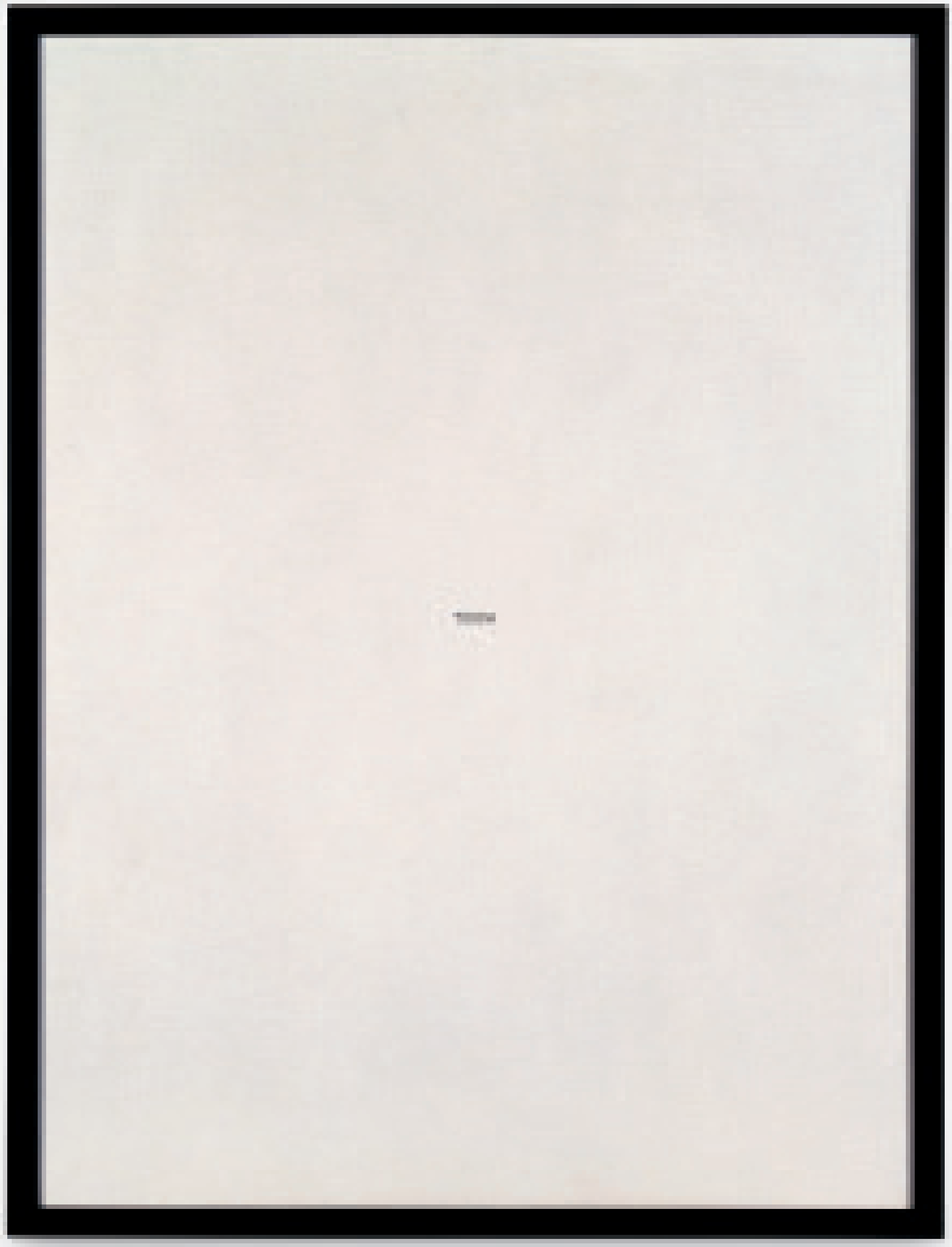
79 **UNTITLED** September 18, 1962 Ink on paper
21 13/16 × 19 13/16 in. (55.4 × 50.3 cm)
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



81 **THE MARCEL DUCHAMP TRAVELLING BOX** 1963
Metal-and-glass box, candle, string, rubber stamp of the artist's signature, ink pad, and plastic pearls
3¾ × 4¾ × 4¼ in. (9.5 × 12 × 10.8 cm)
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, gift of James J. Hanafy, 1976

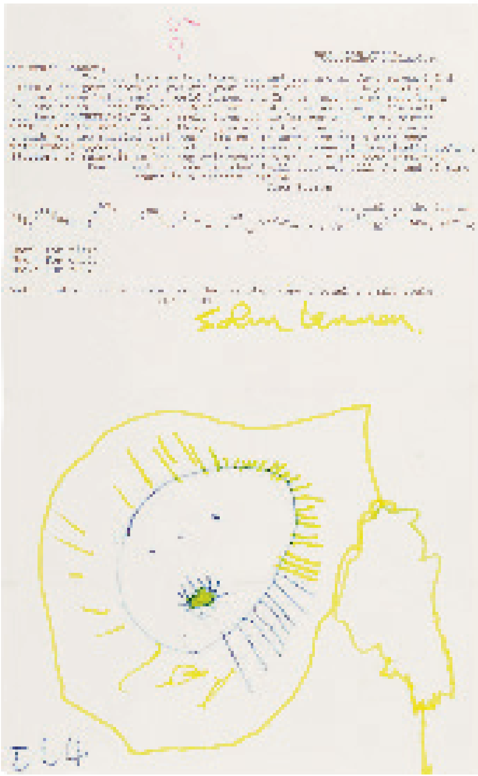


82 **BLUE PLATE/SPECIAL** 1964 Oil on paint-by-numbers canvas board with offset lithograph
Two panels, each: 15 × 33½ in. (38.1 × 85.1 cm)
Collection of Robert Harshorn Shimshak and Marion Brenner

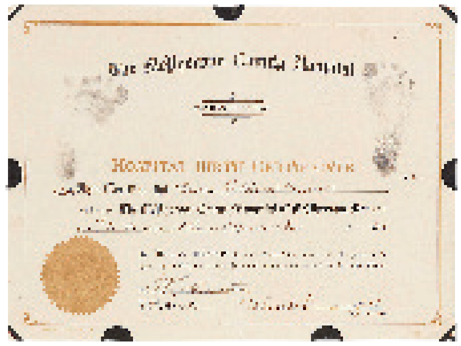




83 **TOUCH/DO NOT TOUCH** (two panels) 1964 Transfer lettering on canvas (twelve panels), and transfer lettering on canvas with Plexiglas (one panel)
Thirteen panels, each: 40 × 30 in. (101.6 × 76.2 cm)
Oakland Museum of California, gift of Mr. William Nicholas Conner, Sr.



26



27



28

26 Letter from John Lennon to Bruce Conner (with drawing by Julian Lennon), 1967. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

27 Bruce Conner's "first print" on his birth certificate, 1933. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

28 Bruce, Jean, and Robert Conner, in a photograph used on the announcement for *Family Show: Bob, Bruce, Jean Conner* at the Quay Gallery, San Francisco, 1972. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

In December 1964 Conner had an exhibition at the influential Robert Fraser Gallery in London. Fraser, also known as "Groovy Bob," introduced him to the Rolling Stones and later shared Conner's films with the Beatles.[87] "John Lennon was knocked out to receive LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS," Fraser told Conner in 1967. "If you'd be kind enough to send five further copies of the movie I'd be very grateful as apart from the three other Beatles there's me and another of your fanatical admirers who would be eager paying customers" (fig. 26).[88] The exhibition traveled from London to Paris's Galerie J in spring 1965, where it was a commercial success, solidifying Conner's presence in European collections.[89]

Also that spring, Conner participated in a two-month residency at Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles. He insisted on signing his work with his thumbprint, an especially rebellious act in the world of fine art lithography, where a fingerprint would ordinarily cause a print to be discarded. He took his iconoclasm one step further with THUMB PRINT (April 26, 1965, pl. 90), which he later identified as "the most significant" of the fourteen prints he produced at the workshop.[90] To Tamarind founder June Wayne, he also proposed creating a photolithograph of his birth certificate (fig. 27), which "contained my first print—my foot-print."[91] He viewed this as "a philosophical extension of the concerns I had of personal identity and social structures, the exploitation of fetishistic attitudes towards identity, which is a tool of power over individual persons."[92] Although these gestures, devised "to defeat the prevailing concepts of artist property and the stamp collector's philosophy of art,"[93] are undeniably witty, Conner also emphasized their seriousness. As one curator who worked with him put it, "His jokes were never frivolous."[94]

87 On Fraser, see Harriet Vyner, *Groovy Bob: The Life and Times of Robert Fraser* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), to which Conner contributed some of his own memories of the dealer.

88 Letter from Robert Fraser to Bruce Conner, June 24, 1967, BCP.

89 Despite his success in Paris, Conner had difficulty getting paid for his work, an experience that permanently sullied his view of France. Conner, interview by Karlstrom and Guilbaut, Mar. 29, 1974.

90 Bruce Conner quoted in Mary Fuller, "You're Looking for Bruce Conner, the Artist, or What Is This Crap You're Trying to Put Over Here?," *Currant* 2, no. 1 (May–July 1976): 11.

91 Conner quoted in Fuller, "You're Looking for Bruce Conner," 9. See also Elizabeth Armstrong and Sheila McGuire, *First Impressions: Early Prints by Forty-Six Contemporary Artists*, exh. cat. (New York: Hudson Hills Press with the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1989), 54–57; and Marjorie Devon, ed., *Tamarind: Forty Years* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 44–46.

92 Letter from Bruce Conner to Sheila McGuire and Elizabeth Armstrong, June 15, 1988, BCP. These same concerns caused him to create PRINTS (1974, pl. 91) in response to San Jose State University's demand that he be fingerprinted as a condition of employment. See Fuller, "You're Looking for Bruce Conner," 58–59; Peter Selz, "The Artist as Dactylographer," in *Bruce Conner: Prints* (Palo Alto, CA: Smith Andersen Gallery, 1974), n.p.

93 Bruce Conner in "A Conversation with Bruce Conner and Robert Dean" (Apr. 27, 1990), in *Bruce Conner: Assemblages, Paintings, Drawings, Engraving Collages, 1960–1990* (Santa Monica: Michael Kohn Gallery, 1990), n.p.

94 Jack Rasmussen, interview conducted by Robert Conway for the Conner Family Trust, Oct. 5, 2012, 7.



29

29 Thomas H. Garver, "Bruce Conner Makes a Sandwich," *Artforum* 6, no. 1 (September 1967)

Shortly after the opening of his first major solo museum exhibition, at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, in fall 1965—where he premiered a version of COSMIC RAY (1961, p. 51) using three projectors[95]—the Conners returned to San Francisco, settling in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. The McClures lived just a few blocks away, and Bruce and Jean remained close with Joan Brown, whose son was Robert's age.[96] In 1967 Conner participated in two high-profile exhibitions: *Funk*, a group show organized by Peter Selz at the University Art Museum at the University of California, Berkeley (now the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive), of which Conner was highly critical, and a solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.[97]

If his 1965 letter to McClure signaled that Conner was in crisis, by the end of 1967 he seemed to arrive at a solution: "[I]n 1967 I quit the art business entirely."[98] In early 1968 he wrote to Charles Alan, "I'm disenchanted with the art world but not so passionately as to make it interesting to me to continue playing the game."[99] In the months preceding this declaration, Conner explored creative outlets beyond the traditional art world. He completed several major films in 1967—REPORT, THE WHITE ROSE, and LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959–67, see pl. 62)—as well as conceptual projects that took aim at the art establishment. "Bruce Conner Makes a Sandwich," published in *Artforum* (fig. 29), is a brilliant parody of an *Art News* series that purported to bring readers into artists' studios (one of the best known

95 See Thomas H. Garver, *Bruce Conner: Sculpture, Assemblages, Drawings, Films*, exh. cat. (Waltham, MA: Poses Institute of Fine Arts, Brandeis University, 1965).

96 After their Haight-Ashbury neighborhood changed quickly for the worse, in 1967 the Conner family moved to 902 Corbett Avenue, at the base of the Twin Peaks neighborhood, before settling permanently at 45 Sussex Street in Glen Park in 1974. Jean Conner, interviews by Conway, 39–47.

97 Peter Selz, *Funk*, exh. cat. (Berkeley, CA: University Art Museum, 1967); Joan C. Siegfried, *Bruce Conner: Sculpture, Assemblages, Collages, Drawings, Films*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1967).

98 Fuller, "You're Looking for Bruce Conner," 12. Rothfuss speculates that Conner was unaware of his inclusion in several group shows during this period. Rothfuss, "Escape Artist," 167n27.

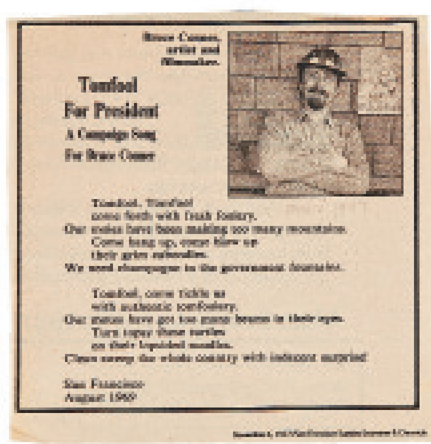
99 Letter from Bruce Conner to Charles Alan, Jan. 8, 1968, BCP.



30



31


Tomfool
For President
A Campaign Song
For Bruce Conner

San Francisco
August 1969

32

30 Foreground: SUPERCONNER campaign soapbox, 1967. Offset self-adhesive stickers, wood, and metal, 7 × 26 × 24 ½ in. (17.8 × 66 × 62.2 cm). Collection of Susan Inglett. Background: BRUCE CONNER SUPERVISOR campaign poster, 1967 (pl. 88). Installation view, Specific Object, New York, 2010

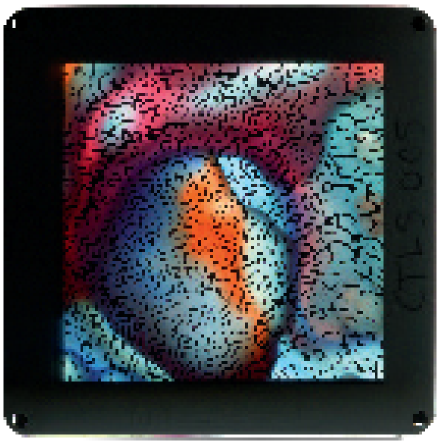
31 Ray Johnson, *Untitled*, ca. 1984. Ink on offset photolithograph, 11 ⅜ × 7 ⅜ in. (28.9 × 18.7 cm). Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, gift of Bruce Conner, 2001

32 James Broughton, "Tomfool for President: A Campaign Song for Bruce Conner" (1969), *Canyon Cinemanews* 77, no. 2 (1977)

being "Pollock Paints a Picture," in the May 1951 issue).[100] He also conceived the DENNIS HOPPER ONE MAN SHOW, proposing to Los Angeles dealer Nicholas Wilder that he exhibit a group of paper collages sourced from nineteenth-century engravings (which he had been making privately for years) under Hopper's name (pls. 141–64). The concept would be complete when Hopper, a friend of Conner's and an artist in his own right, entered the gallery and discovered the false attribution. Wilder refused the project, but Conner later realized the DENNIS HOPPER ONE MAN SHOW in a series of photo-etchings of his collages, which he published in three volumes with Crown Point Press (1971–73, pl. 165) and exhibited at the James Willis Gallery in San Francisco in 1973.

Conner's most trenchant challenge to the status quo was his 1967 campaign for a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors (see figs. 30–32). In his declaration of candidacy, he listed his occupation as "nothing" and quoted scripture where he was asked to list his qualifications, writing, "The light of the body is the eye; therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole body

100 See John Yau, "In Conversation: Bruce Conner with John Yau," *Brooklyn Rail*, Nov. 1, 2004, http://www.brooklynrail.org/2004/11/art/bruce-conner-in-conversation.



33



34

33 Hand-painted slide used in performances by the North American Ibis Alchemical Company, 1967. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

34 Victor Moscoso, *Miller Blues Band, Doors, North American Ibis Alchemical Co.; Avalon Ballroom, June 1–4, 1967*, 1967. Offset lithograph, 20 × 14 in. (50.8 cm × 35.6 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Jim Chanin

also is full of light; but when thine eye is dark, thy body also is full of darkness."[101] (Conner's father, with whom he had a contentious relationship, ran for a seat on the Wichita City Commission the same year, and one cannot help but wonder at the synchronicity.)

In 1967 Conner also joined the North American Ibis Alchemical Company, which created light shows at San Francisco's Avalon Ballroom to accompany concerts produced by the Family Dog (figs. 33 and 34). He was excited by the immediacy of the medium, saying: "Since my films were extensions of music, or music in relation to image, what more perfect way than to improvise and create at the time that it's happening and have it immediately consumed rather than go through this long delaying tactic of working for months and months and then trying to coerce people into a little room to look at this sort of thing."[102] He also relished the communal spirit of the group, short-lived though it was, comparing it to working in "a jazz group, improvising with the music and the people and the environment."[103] The group's final show took place at the San Francisco Museum of Art in November 1967, as part of a performance called *Two Tape Elegies for John Muir and Walt Disney* by Patrick Gleeson. An English professor at the time, Gleeson would become a pioneer of synthesizer music and later created soundtracks for several of Conner's films, including CROSSROADS, TAKE THE 5:10 TO DREAMLAND (1977), and LUKE (1967/2004, p. 329).

Just as he had been one of the foremost practitioners of what became known as Beat art in the 1950s, Conner was at the leading edge of the visual culture of the hippie era (much as he

101 Luke 11:34. The declaration can be found in the Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. See also Gary Garrels, "Soul Stirrer: Visions and Realities of Bruce Conner," in this volume. More than three decades later, the security badges that Conner used during the installation of *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II* at the de Young Museum similarly identified his position as "nothing" and "American art nothing."

102 Conner quoted in Boswell, "Theater of Light and Shadow," 70.

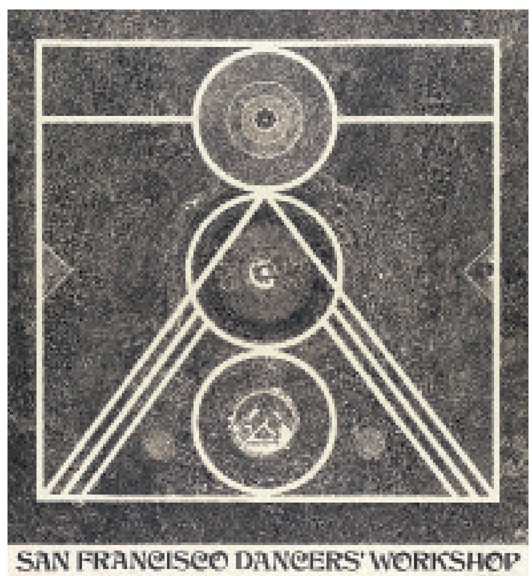
103 Bruce Conner in Chuck Hudina, "Bruce Conner: Visitor in the World, Part 2" (interview), *Release Print* 9, no. 4 (Apr. 1986): 3.



36



35



37

35 *The San Francisco Oracle*, August 1967; cover design by Bruce Conner. Collection of Steven Fama. This design, based on drawings including MANDALA (1966, pl. 105) and UNTITLED (August 31, 1966), appeared on four alternately colored covers for this issue

36 *Canyon Cinemanews* 70, no. 4 (1970); cover drawing by Bruce Conner. Collection of Steven Fama

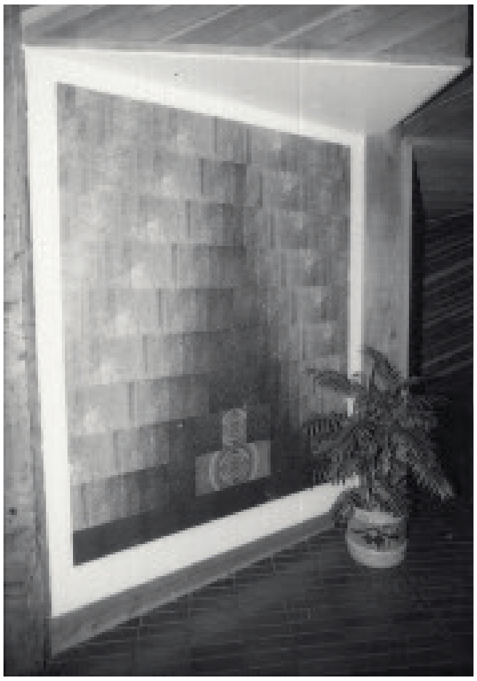
37 San Francisco Dancers' Workshop poster, 1974. Screenprint, ed. of 1,000; 37 ¼ × 33 ¾ in. (94.6 × 85.7 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Dancers' Workshop

detested the labels "Beat" and "hippie"). He advised Dennis Hopper on the look of his film *Easy Rider* (1969)[104] and was commissioned to paint a baby elephant for the Peter Sellers movie *The Party* (1968), adapting an image of this event for the poster used in his campaign for supervisor (pl. 88).[105] A natural dancer, Conner is featured in a frenetic dance scene in *The Cool Ones* (1967), a movie choreographed by his friend Toni Basil, with whom he had collaborated on BREAKAWAY (1966, pl. 20).

His drawings, which at times resemble the typography and ornamentation of psychedelic posters, were disseminated beyond gallery walls. The work 23 KENWOOD AVENUE (1963, pl. 100) was reproduced on the endpapers of *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1964) by Richard Alpert, Timothy Leary, and Ralph Metzner. Vibrantly colored reproductions of drawings appeared on a series of four covers for the August 1967 issue of the *San Francisco Oracle* and on the front and back covers of a 1970 issue of Canyon Cinema's *Cinemanews* (figs. 35 and 36), the newsletter of the film distribution

104 On Conner's relationship to "New Hollywood," see Johanna Gosse, "Cinema at the Crossroads: Bruce Conner's Atomic Sublime, 1958–2008" (PhD diss., Bryn Mawr College, 2014), 109–14.

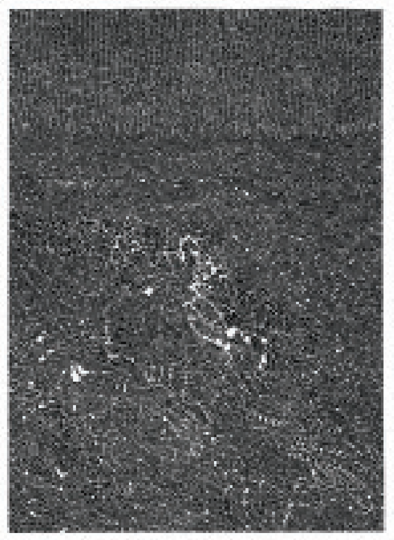
105 In the end, a different elephant was used in the movie.



38



39



40

38 Mural of offset lithographs created from BOOK TWO (February 9, 1970, pl. 106), at Different Fur Studios, San Francisco, 1976. Photograph by Edmund Shea

39 UNTITLED, December 26, 1969. Felt-tip pen on paper, 23 × 17 in. (58.4 × 43.2 cm). Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, promised gift of Kristine Stiles. Bruce Conner's approach to the preservation of his work was variable. He imbued this drawing with a performative quality when he gave it to Kristine Stiles as a wedding gift in 1980, instructing her to hang it in direct sunlight so that it would fade over time. A decade earlier he had documented its composition in an edition of offset lithographs (fig. 40)

40 #124, 1970–71. Offset lithograph, ed. of 80; 23 × 16 ½ in. (58.4 × 41.9 cm). Courtesy Conner Family Trust

co-op with which Conner was closely (and contentiously) associated.[106] He designed a poster for Anna Halprin's San Francisco Dancers' Workshop (1974, fig. 37), projecting it on the walls of the San Francisco Museum of Art's rotunda during a 1974 performance celebrating the troupe's twentieth anniversary,[107] and created seven murals for Gleeson's recording studio, Different Fur, in 1976 (fig. 38). The murals consisted of groupings of impressions taken from a large set of commercially printed offset lithographs he had produced in 1970–71. These lithographs captured the compositions of drawings from the 1960s, many of which were fading over time (figs. 39 and 40). Conner also hoped to earn money through the sale of the prints, a prospect that compelled him to emerge from retirement.[108]

106 Conner designed the organization's logo as well. On Canyon Cinema, see Scott MacDonald, *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

107 Conner had attended Halprin's classes in the 1960s. Conner, interview by Karlstrom, Aug. 12, 1974.

108 Fuller, "You're Looking for Bruce Conner," 12.

FOLLOWING PAGES: 84

REPORT 1963–67
16mm film, black and white, sound, 13 min.
Courtesy Conner Family Trust

Narrative chronology continues on page 186


AGENCY IDENT. №
SIX
PICTURE
3
FINISH


AVAIL
SELL

REPORT

From a lecture by Stan Brakhage at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, April 1973

> *The problem in making the film was that in order for me to do the film I would also have to go through the same processes that these people were using to exploit Kennedy. If the film was completed then he was as dead as they had made him. So it took me two and a half years to finish the film. That has something to do with why it changed. Part of the reason why it changed, why we go through these eight versions of the 16mm film, was that I did not want to stop the changes. Like life is change. Like when REPORT was finished—then he was dead. So it took me two and a half years to acknowledge that he was dead.*
> —Bruce Conner

So I want to start with a film that is difficult to take anything but thoughtfully, and that is Conner's film on the assassination of President Kennedy. It is called REPORT. It was completed about two and a half years after President Kennedy was assassinated.

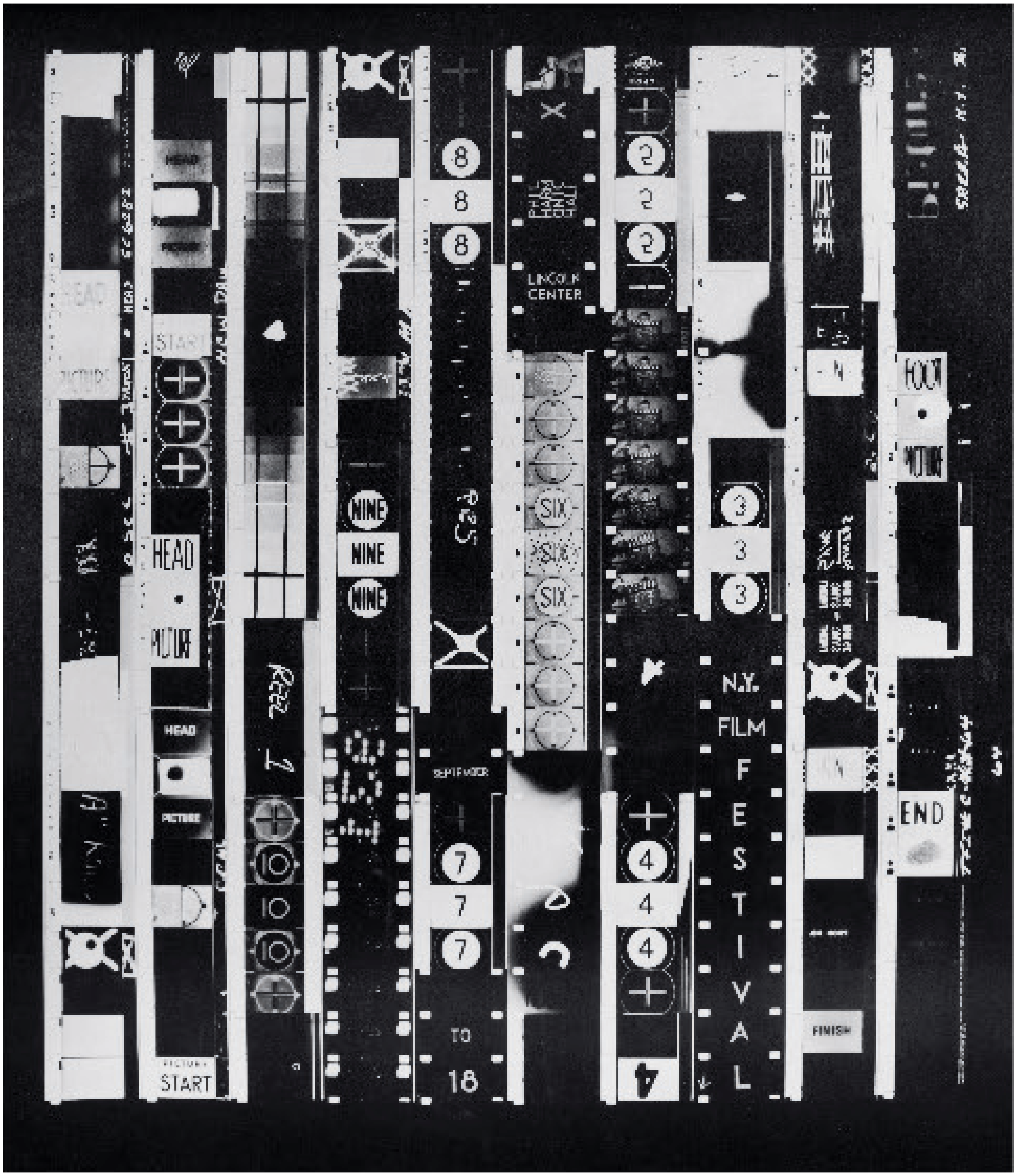
First, let me say a little bit about it. He made many versions of this film before he completed one; that is, many 16mm versions, and as I understand it, only one 8mm version. The 8mm version was, obviously, picked up at the time of the assassination from TV images. At that time he was living in Brookline, Massachusetts, which is just outside of Boston. He went through the catharsis and shock that most of America did—the assassination was so immediate to people. It was on TV, it was on radio, you could not escape it. Almost immediately he had his camera in hand, and as they started repeating these shots he took images from the TV screen and very quickly produced an 8mm film. This film is quite different from the film he made many versions of and struggled with for two and a half years.

I think the difference says a great deal about his work and gives you a real perspective on two types of filmmaking. With 8mm you have all the immediate potentiality of the powers of a sketch. You have that brevity, the quickness, the lightweightedness of the camera, that expendability of it. Nothing in the area of 8mm will ever be in the consideration for prizes or awards. In fact, even in this classroom we have to go a little out of our way. The projector sits on the floor. It will be a little like home movies. The lights will be dim, you will have to strain a bit to see it—the image is small—expendable, in every sense of the word.

You might almost use as a metaphor that brooding and struggling with 16mm, with all of its technical resources, is like creating an oil painting. Conner struggled between these two concepts—a sketch or, say, a masterpiece—in making the 16mm version. The 8mm is the immediate capturing of his immediate feelings at this point. The 16mm is thoroughly worked through. Of the many versions he made of the 16mm film he says that most of the changes were in the first eight minutes. The first eight minutes of the first four editings of this film had certain events repeating and repeating with no variation. Like the one shot which shows the carrying of the rifle down the hallway. In one version, for eight minutes he repeated (with slight variations) the carrying of Oswald's rifle down the hallway. The next one was the shot of Jacqueline Kennedy going up to the door of the ambulance to open the door. I remember this one vividly myself. The door is locked and she steps back. He made a version which repeated this shot over and over again. The third one was the motorcade coming by before the actual assassination. The fourth was a scene of Jacqueline Kennedy in Washington, where the casket is lying in state. She walks up to the casket, kneels down, kisses the casket, and walks away. At that same point where she starts toward the casket, it repeats over and over again, so that, as with the ambulance door, she never gets to the casket—just as she never gets inside the ambulance. So there are metaphors on death, not just intrinsic to the Kennedy assassination, but through Conner's using that occasion in a very Kansas way of facing death that you could research by reading *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* carefully.

How many of you had the feeling in watching this, that particularly overcame me so strongly at the time, that when Oswald is going down the hall, we all know that at some moment Ruby steps out and shoots him, but almost with the purity of Greek drama this is not made visible in Conner's film? All of us know these faces and images and what happens, but I would guess that even if you knew nothing of the events there would be a sense of peril and terror throughout Bruce's film. The images shown out of focus and utterly abstract would be nerve-wracking. Suddenly, in their collage effect, these images become menacing, a carrier of death—not just the faces of one or two men, but there is a wand that seems to come out in the air from the side where we know he was shot. How many of you saw that? You will see it again in the 16mm version, so watch for it, but it is particularly alive in the 8mm. There is a movement over on the right as Oswald becomes flanked by two men, and it is as though he were going to be downed by the bad fairy or something. This wand will come down and kill him, or something will—this menacing shark-shape, or the woman doing the TV ad; Conner freezes her when her teeth are bared.

Bruce was just alive and wracked on that day of the assassination and had to make his homage. To what? To Kennedy? To death? Alive and in a state of nervousness before that TV set, he took images charged with the immediacy of the actual event. It should be as real as if you were there: And here sits the artist; and he knows it is not real at all. It is made up of thus and so, and he with his camera is making it up again, trying to get at this event in stark terror and death. This is the quality that makes this film great.



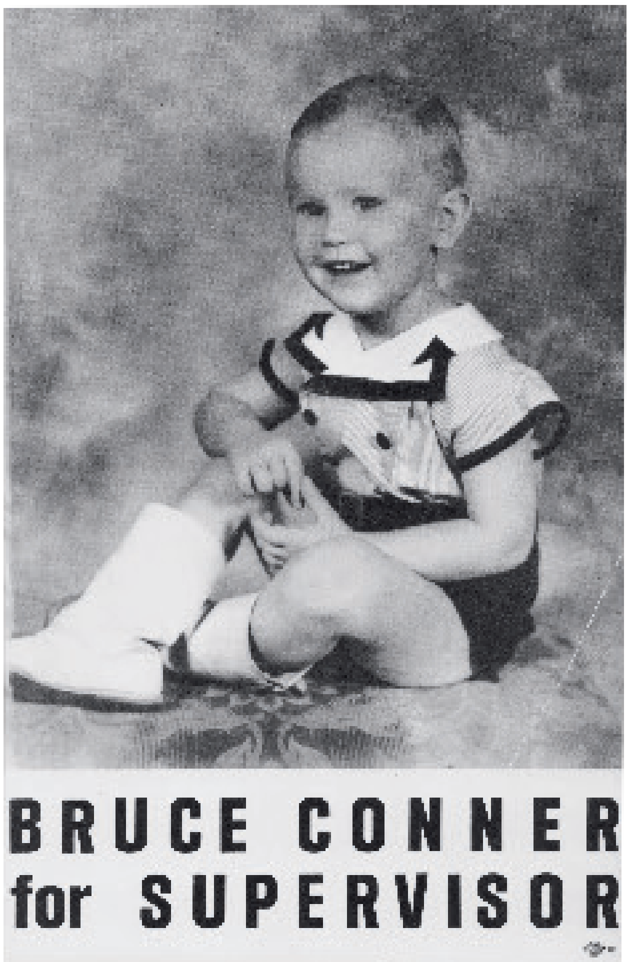
85 **New York Film Festival poster** 1965 Offset photolithograph with thumbprint and ink stamps of the artist's signature
35 × 30 in. (88.9 × 76.2 cm)
Collection of Steven Fama



86 **APPLAUSE COPYRIGHT © 1966 BY BRUCE CONNER. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

(second edition) 1970

Offset lithograph, ed. of 75
$7\frac{1}{16} \times 20\frac{7}{8}$ in. (17.9 × 53 cm)
Published by the artist
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, John B. Turner Fund





87 **BRUCE CONNER FOR SUPERVISOR** 1967 Offset photolithograph
11½ × 7½ in. (29.2 × 19.1 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust

88 **BRUCE CONNER SUPERVISOR** 1967 Screenprint
26 × 20 in. (66 × 50.8 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Michael Kohn



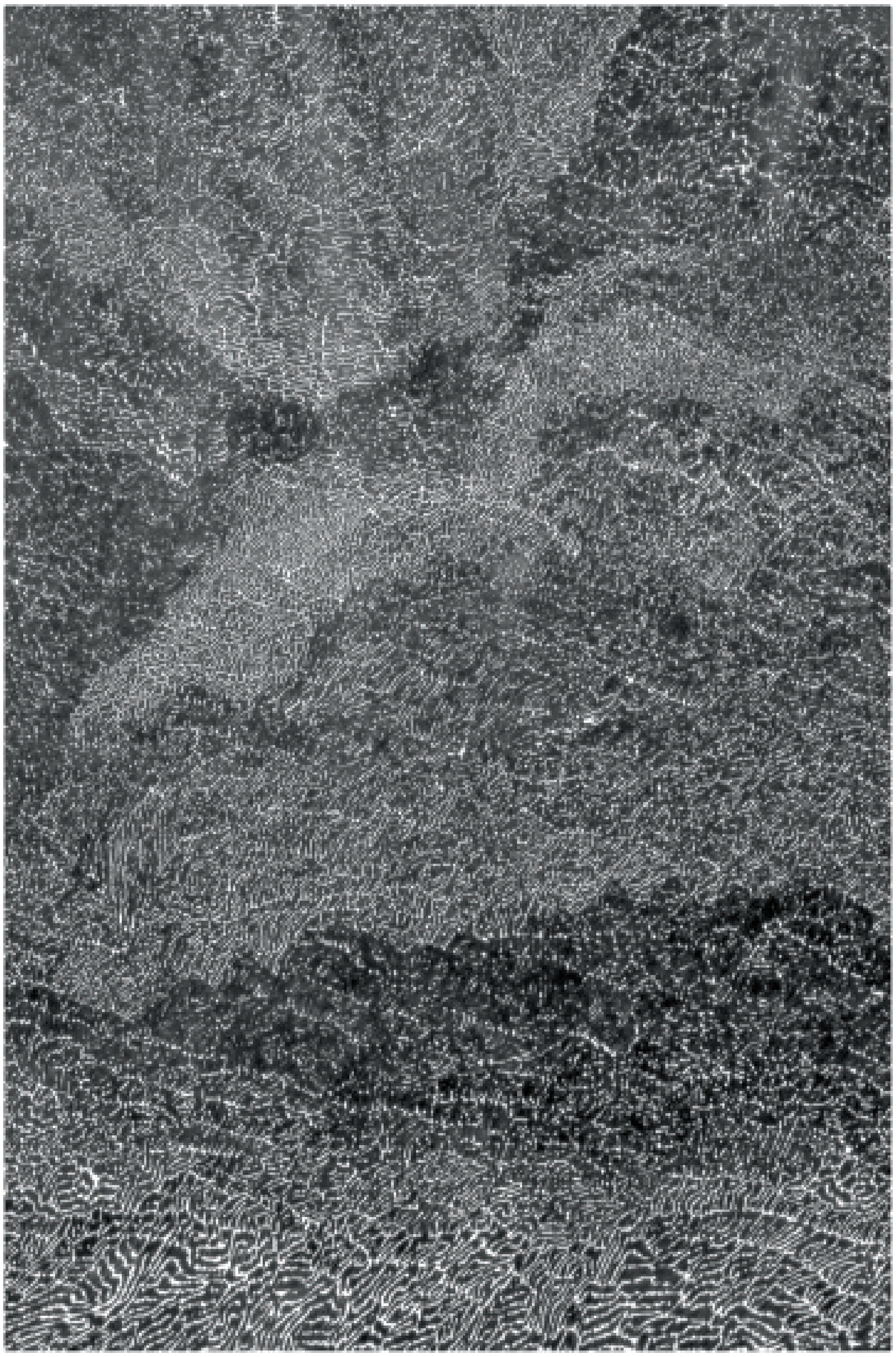


89 **HANDPRINT** February 16, 1965 Artist's blood on paper
11 × 8½ in. (27.9 × 21.6 cm)
Collection of Steven Fama

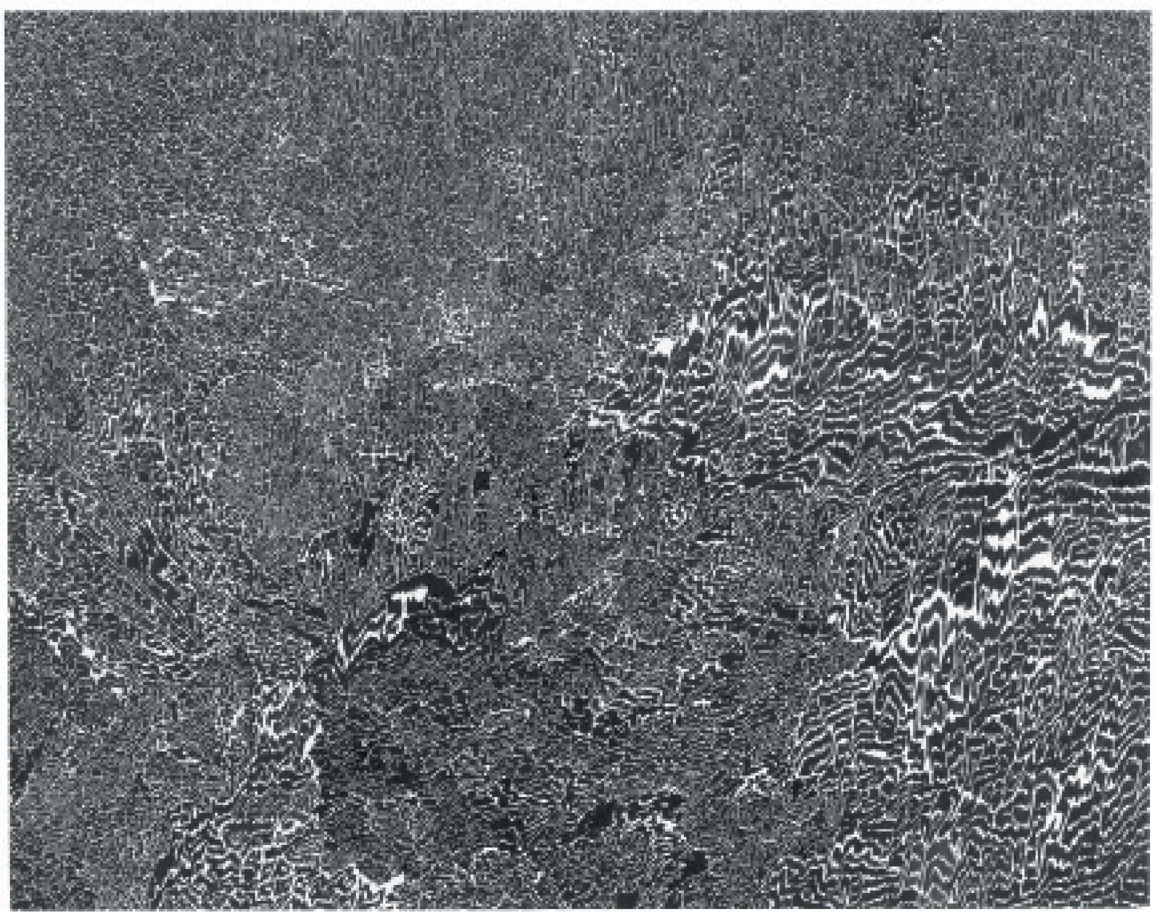
90 **THUMB PRINT** April 26, 1965 Lithograph
41⅜ × 30 in. (105.1 × 76.2 cm)
Published by Tamarind Lithography Workshop
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase



91 **PRINTS** 1974 Steel lockbox, paper envelopes with typewritten text, photocopies, gelatin silver prints, keys, plastic bags, plastic folders, paper folders, and ink fingerprints, ed. of 20
Dimensions variable
Published by Smith Andersen Editions, Palo Alto, California
Courtesy Senior & Shopmaker Gallery, New York

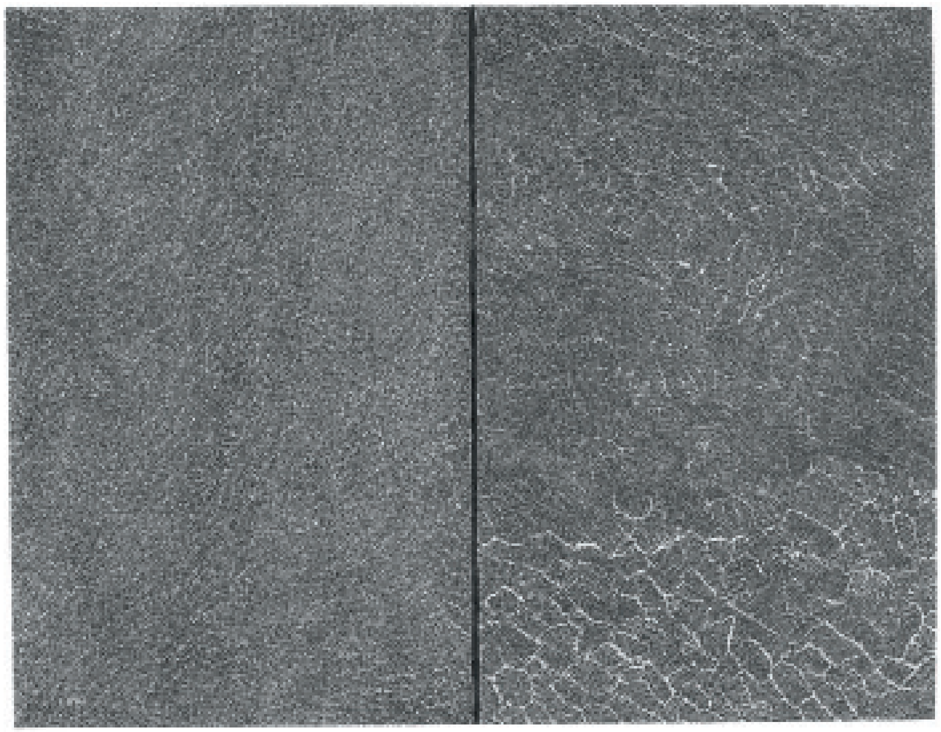


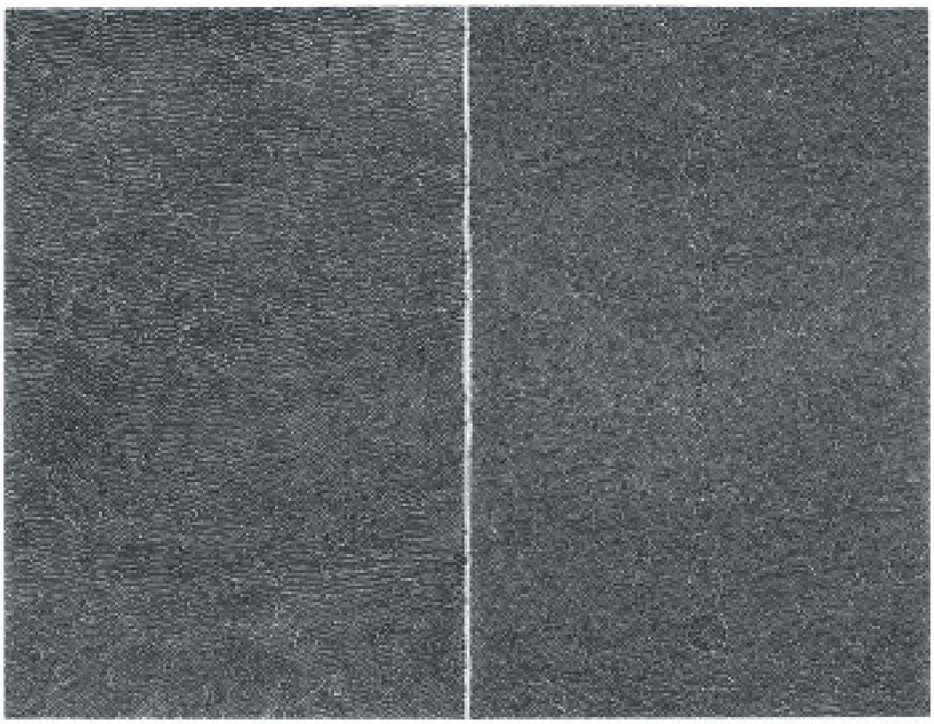
92 **UNTITLED** 1966 Felt-tip pen on paper
38 × 25½ in. (96.5 × 64.8 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust



93 UNTITLED, 34 CARL STREET, SAN FRANCISCO January 15, 1967

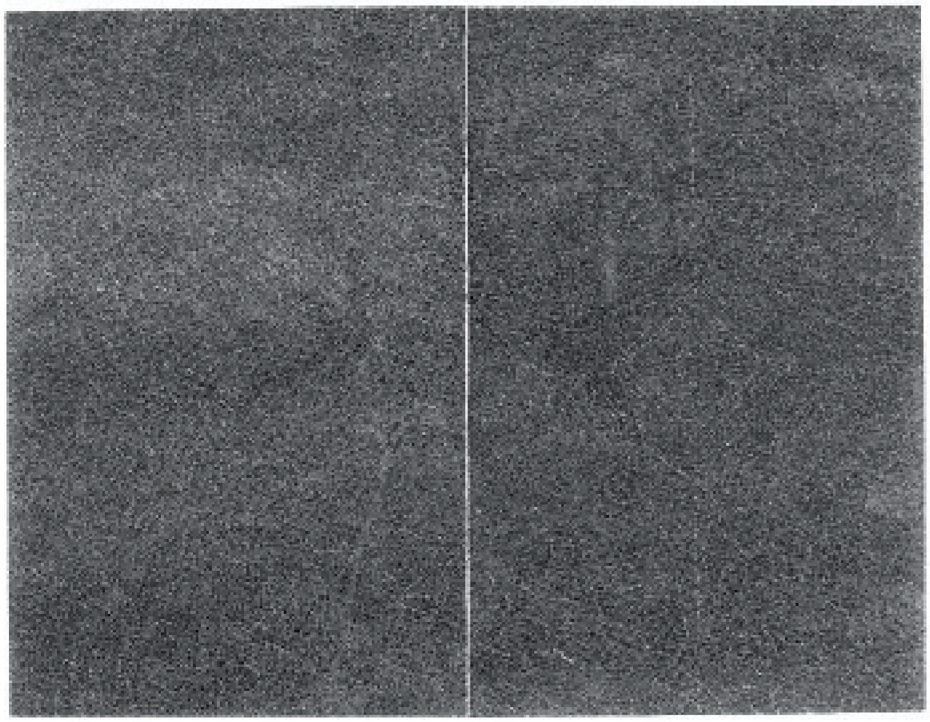
Ink on paper
20½ × 26½ in. (52.1 × 67.3 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

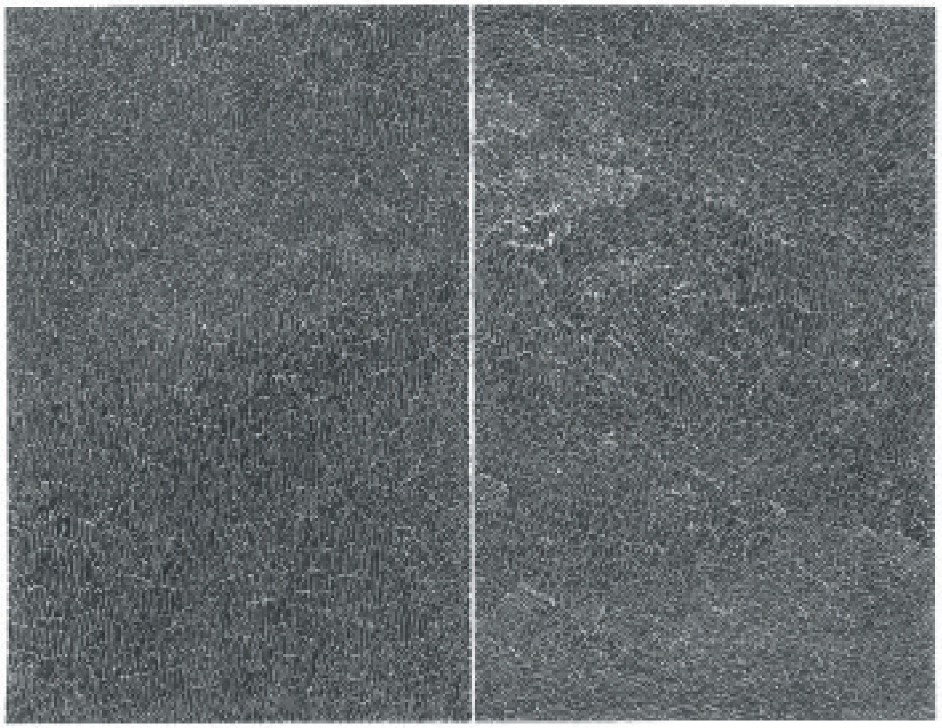




94 **BOOK PAGES** 1967 Felt-tip pen on paper
8 ½ × 10 15/16 in. (21.6 × 27.8 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Mortimer Fleishhacker, Jr. Memorial Fund purchase

95 **BOOK PAGES** 1967 Felt-tip pen on paper
8 ½ × 11 1/16 in. (21.6 × 28.1 cm)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, gift of Werner H. and Sarah-Ann Kramarsky, 1998





96 **BOOK PAGES** 1967 Felt-tip pen on paper
8 ½ × 11 in. (21.6 × 27.9 cm)
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, General Acquisition Fund

97 **BOOK PAGES** 1967 Felt-tip pen on paper
8 ½ × 11 in. (21.6 × 27.9 cm)
Baltimore Museum of Art, Anna Elizabeth Fehl Acquisitions Endowment



98 **CARDS** (second edition) 1970–71

Bruce Conner and Michael McClure
Offset lithographs and fabric-covered box, ed. of 50
Twenty-five cards, each (approx.): 3 3/8 × 3 3/8 in. (8.5 × 8.5 cm); overall (closed): 4 5/16 × 4 × 9/16 in. (11 × 10.1 × 1.5 cm)
Published by the artists
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, John B. Turner Fund

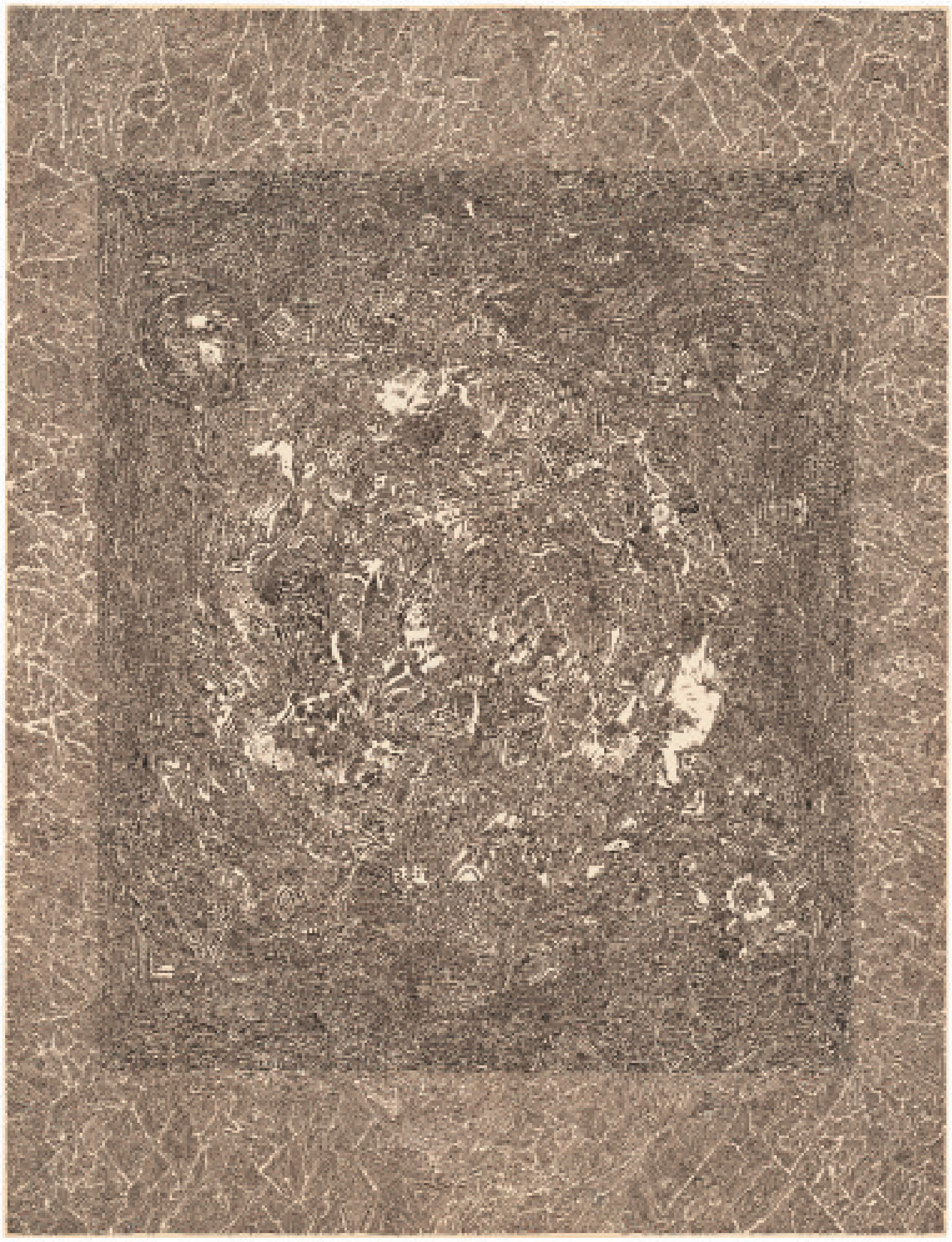
CARDS

YEAH BRUCE, I CAN REMEMBER IN ANY DECEMBER
YULE OR EASTER ALL THE FEASTS
of Art you've made
—or at least the ones of them
I've seen.
All decked out in feathers
and little lips
of grizzly fur
drops of wax
chrome bearings
shards of sparkling mirrors
paper bags
silk stockings
peyote buttons
cast in wax
((Or I can see you bending with a palette knife in hand
over some noble portrait like a profile
by Ucello, Cosimo, Mantegna—and it glowed
with all the beautiful sense that you poured in.
Why I
can even remember
the cover that you did
for Art Class for the poems
of e. e. cummings. It was
a long necked and long headed
man—with arm
upraised in a sort of salmon flesh color.
I can even remember your far-out piece you sold Paul Miner
with stars
and faces dotted
thereon.
AND
now its a lot more
than twenty years later
and there's your new brown
and black pure work
of mandala genius hanging
on my wall above
my head.
Pure art and beauty and it tells
me poems are like little
moths to put
out wings and fly this
"Noel"
to you and yours.

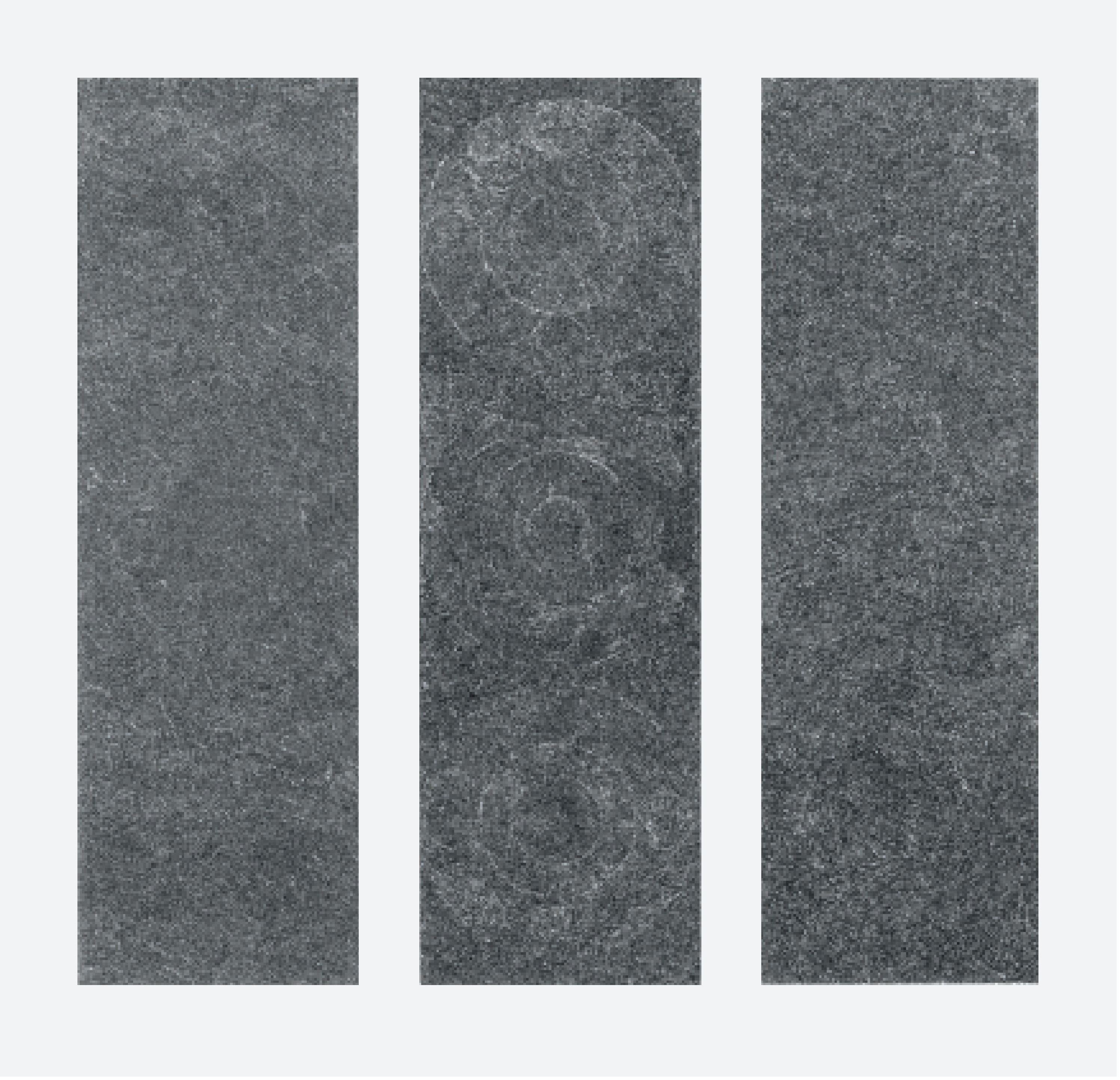
Michael McClure, 1970



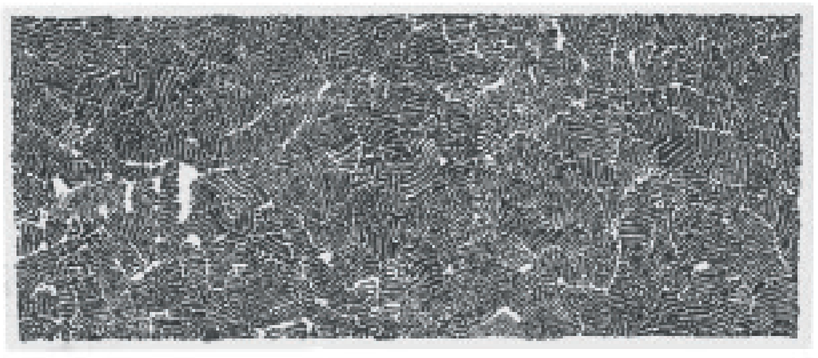
99 **UNTITLED** August 31, 1963 Ink on paper
23 7/8 × 20 in. (60.6 × 50.8 cm)
Private collection, Switzerland, courtesy Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles

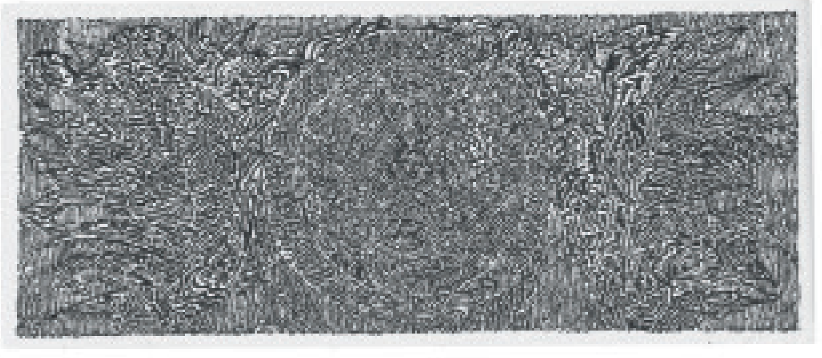


100 **23 KENWOOD AVENUE** 1963 Ink on paper
26 × 20 in. (66 × 50.8 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, purchase and partial gift of Achim Moeller in memory of Paul Cummings



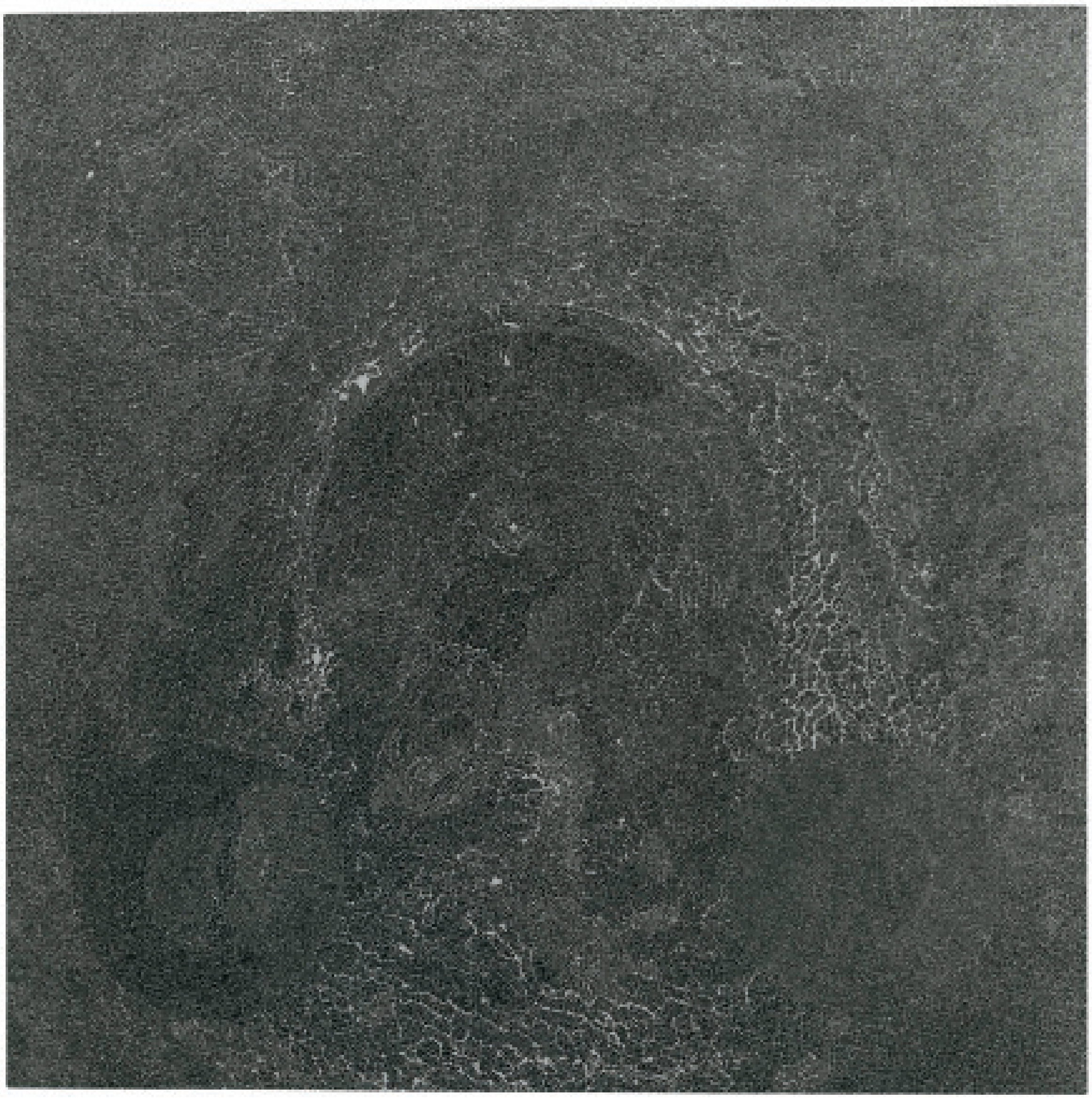
101 **TRIPTYCH** 1964 Felt-tip pen on paper
Three drawings, each: 14 7/8 × 4 5/8 in. (37.8 × 11.8 cm)
Private collection



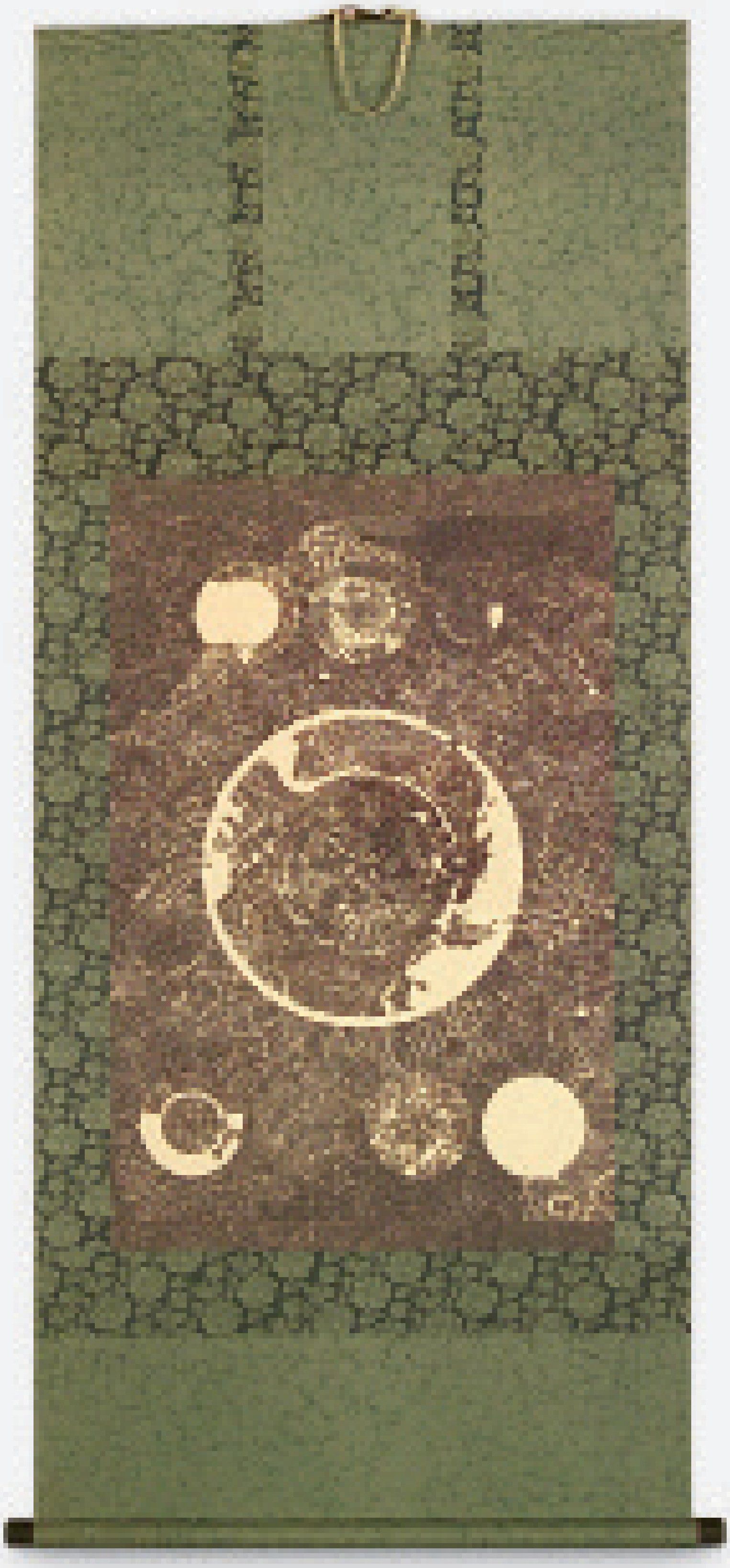


102 **UNTITLED** 1965 Ink on paper
2 5/8 × 6 1/8 in. (6.7 × 15.6 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust

103 **UNTITLED** 1965 Ink on paper
2 5/8 × 6 1/8 in. (6.7 × 15.6 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust



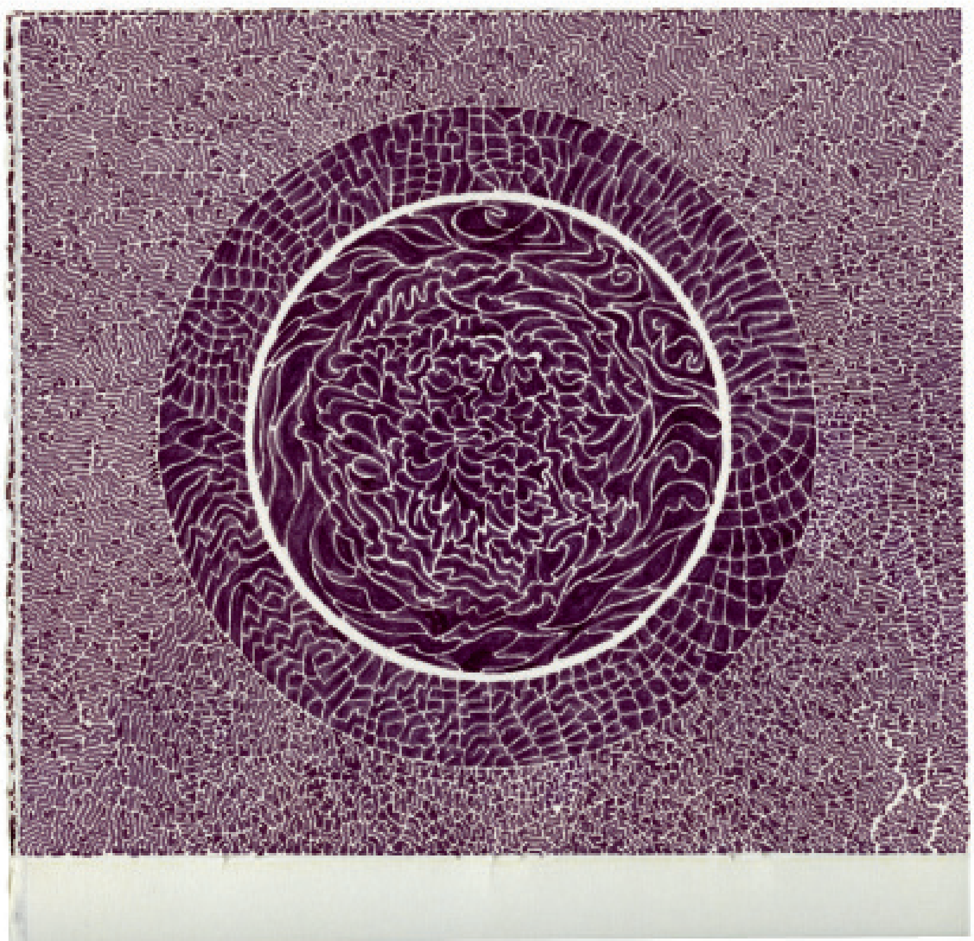
104 **MANDALA** 1966 Felt-tip pen on paper
25½ × 25½ in. (64.8 × 64.8 cm)
Collection of Manfred Simchowitz



105 **MANDALA** 1966 Felt-tip pen on paper mounted on scroll
50 × 25 in. (127 × 63.5 cm)
Collection of Joseph and Lannis Raffael

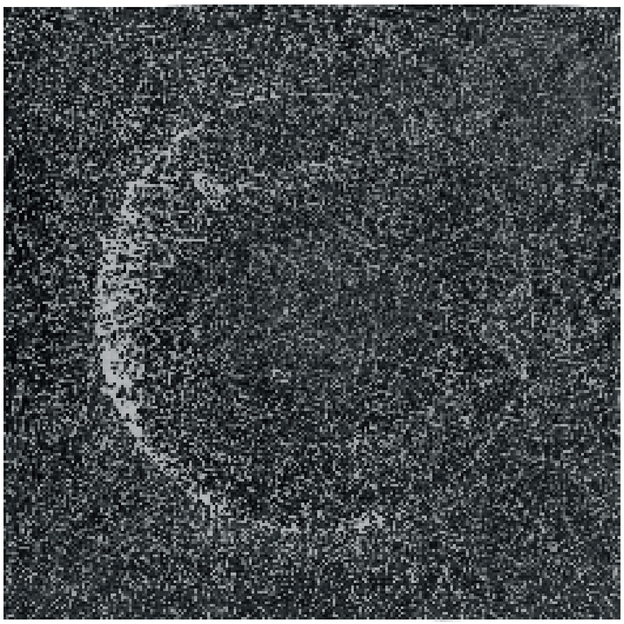


106 **BOOK TWO** February 9, 1970 Felt-tip pen on accordion-folded paper
Open: 8 13/16 × 92 3/4 in. (22.4 × 235.6 cm)
Collection of Martin M. Hale, Jr.



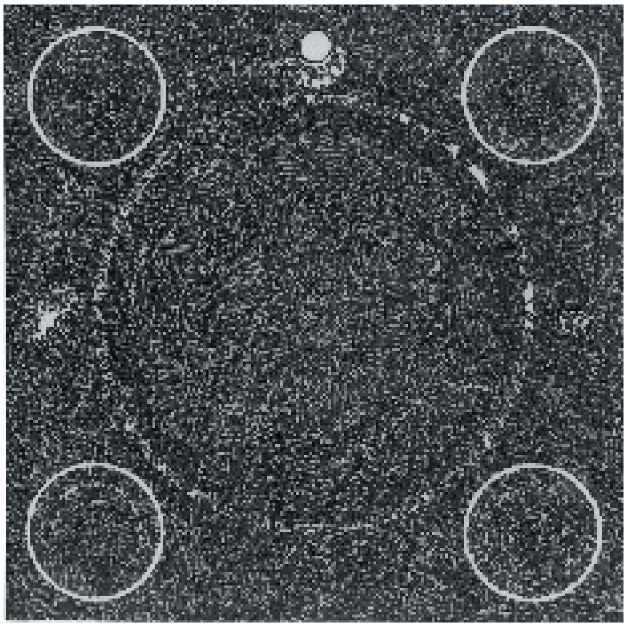
107 **UNTITLED** 1970 Book with five felt-tip pen drawings
Closed: 8 × 7 1/8 in. (20.3 × 18.1 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust

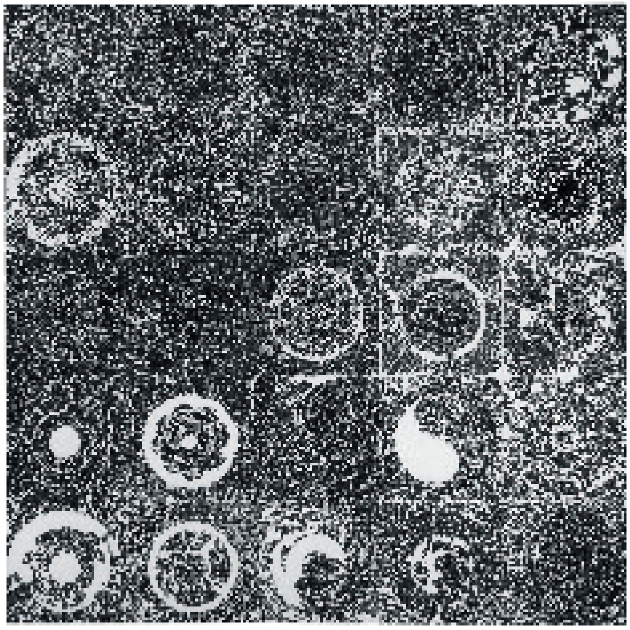


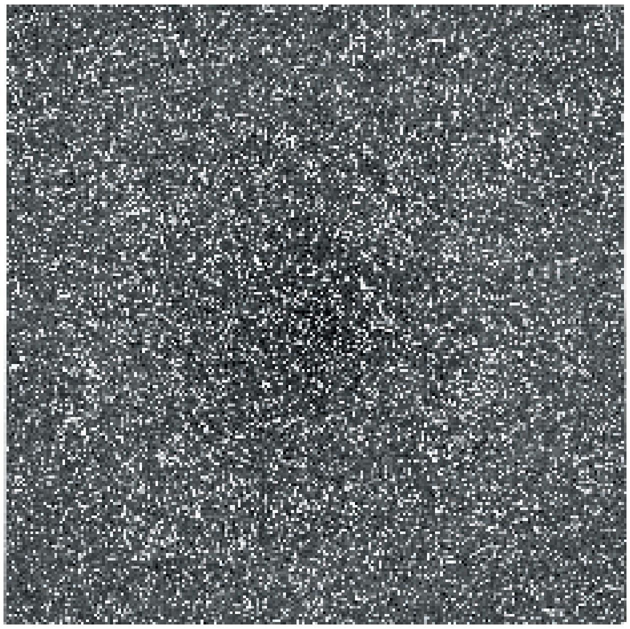


109 **UNTITLED, from MANDALA SERIES** 1965 Felt-tip pen on paper
10 × 10 in. (25.4 × 25.4 cm)
Collection of Irving Stenn

108 **UNTITLED, from MANDALA SERIES** 1965 Felt-tip pen on paper
10 1⁄16 × 10 1⁄16 in. (25.6 × 25.6 cm)
The Morgan Library & Museum, New York



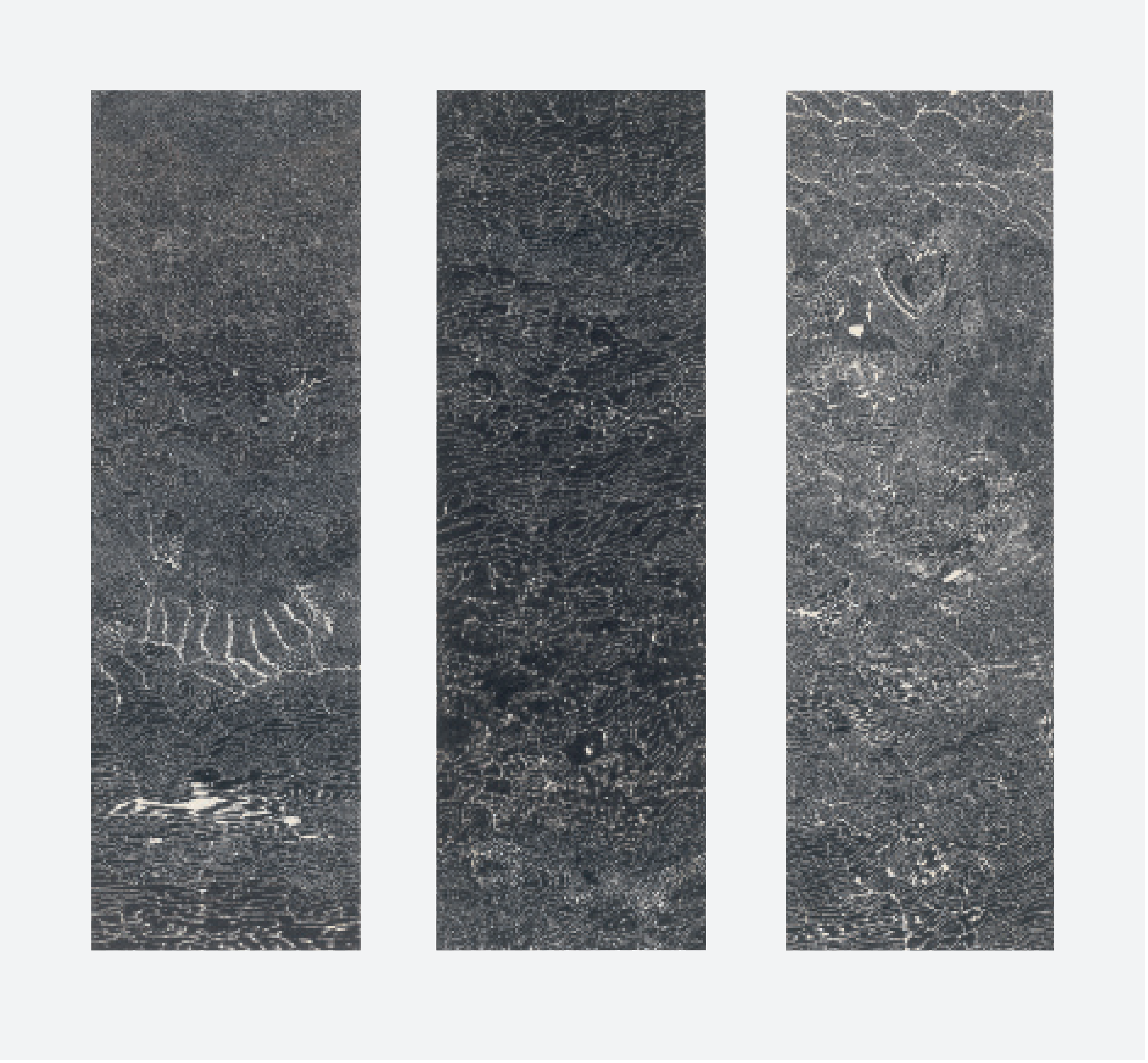




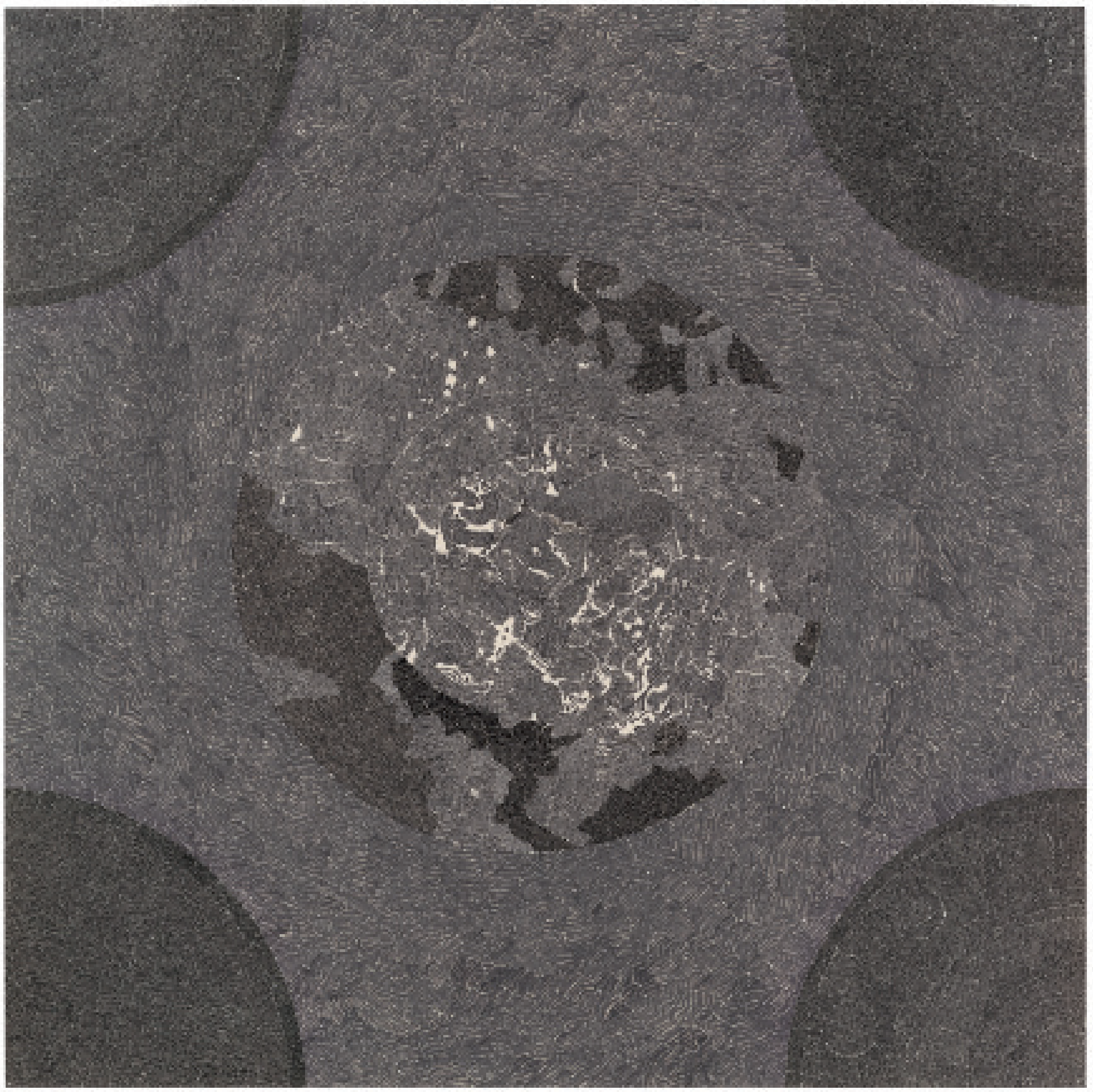
110 **UNTITLED, from MANDALA SERIES** 1965 Felt-tip pen on paper
10 × 10 in. (25.4 × 25.4 cm)
The Art Institute of Chicago, Margaret Fisher Endowment Fund

111 **UNTITLED, from MANDALA SERIES** 1965 Felt-tip pen on paper
10 × 10 in. (25.4 × 25.4 cm)
The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Anstiss and Ronald Krueck

112 **UNTITLED, from MANDALA SERIES** 1965 Felt-tip pen on paper
9 15/16 × 9 7/8 in. (25.2 × 25.1 cm)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee



113 **TRIPTYCH III** 1965 Felt-tip pen on paper
Three drawings, each: 15 × 4 ¾ in. (38.1 × 12.1 cm)
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, Richard Brown Baker, BA 1935, Collection



114 **UNTITLED** March 12, 1965 Felt-tip pen on paper
20⅛ × 20⅛ in. (51.1 × 51.1 cm)
Collection of Gordon VeneKlasen



115 **UNTITLED** September 1, 1973 Ink on paper
30 × 22 ⅜ in. (76.2 × 56.8 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy





116 **UNTITLED DRAWING** July 17, 1974
Ink on paper
12 × 9 7/8 in. (30.5 × 25.1 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

117 **UNTITLED** November 8, 1973
Ink on paper
12 1/2 × 10 1/2 in. (31.8 × 26.7 cm)
San Jose Museum of Art, gift of Ruth and Tod Braunstein



118 **UNTITLED DRAWING** July 27, 1974

Ink on paper

21 15/16 × 20 ½ in. (55.7 × 52.1 cm)

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Margaret Fisher Fund

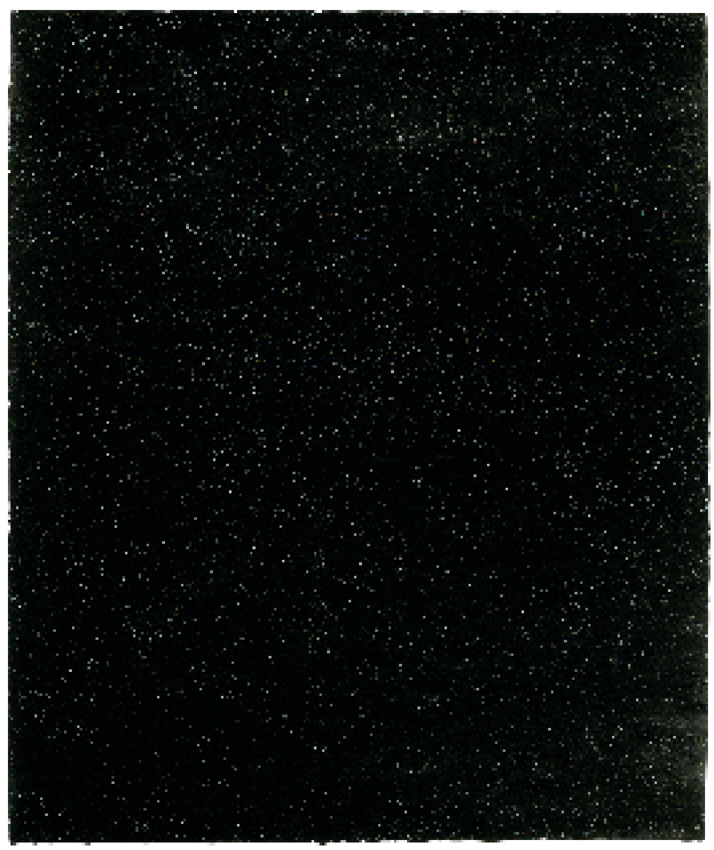


119 **UNTITLED DRAWING** July 31, 1974 Ink on paper
22 × 20⅜ in. (55.9 × 51.8 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection, gift



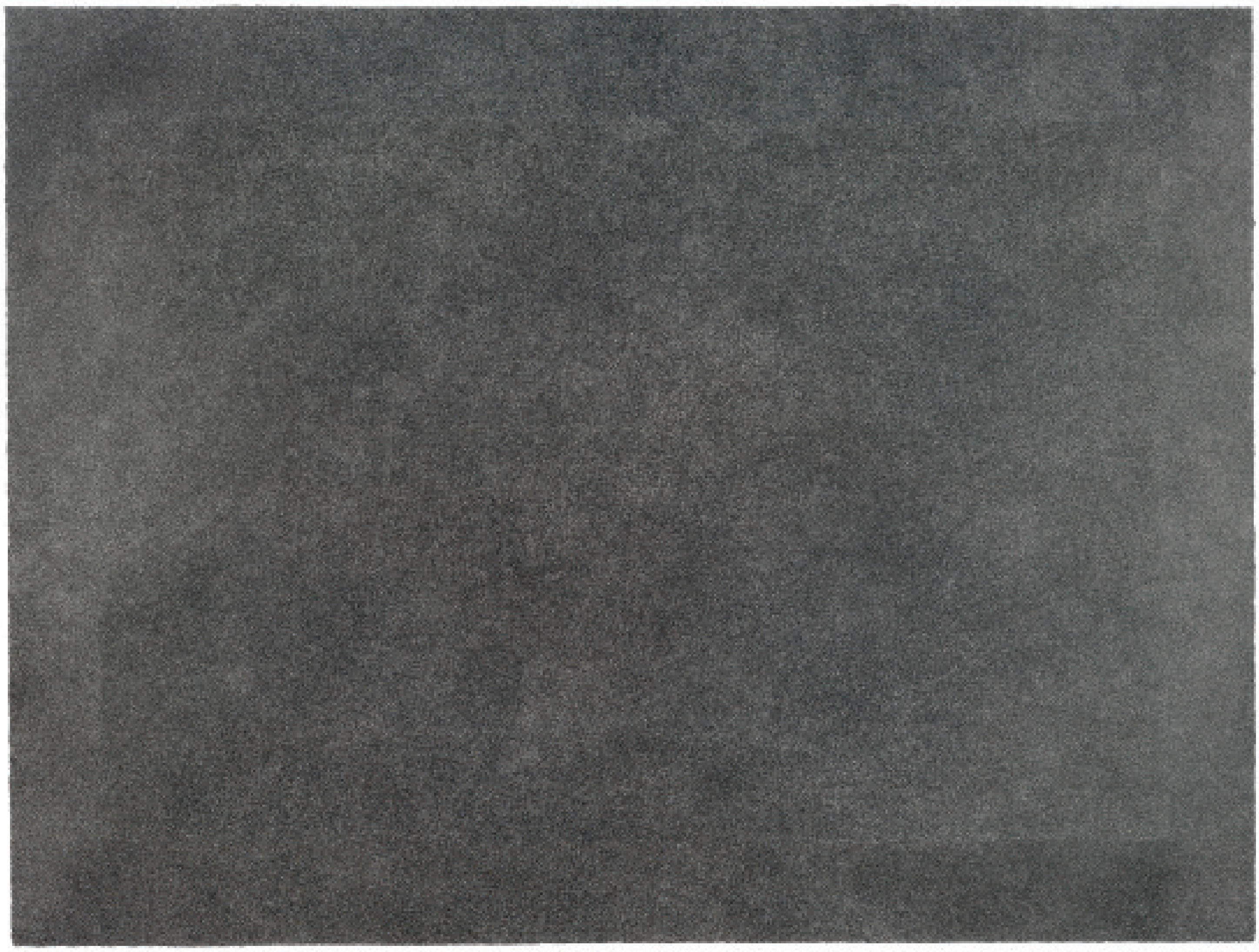
120 **UNTITLED DRAWING** October 6, 1974 Ink on paper
22 × 20½ in. (55.9 × 52.1 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy





121 **UNTITLED DRAWING** October 27, 1974 Ink on paper
22 × 20¼ in. (55.9 × 51.4 cm)
Collection of Tim Savinar and Patricia Unterman

122 **STARS** July 1975 Ink on paper
22¼ × 18⅝ in. (56.5 × 47.3 cm)
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Prints and Drawings
Deaccession Funds



123 **LAST DRAWING** 1976–80 Ink on paper
18⅛ × 24 in. (46 × 61 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Ruth and Moses Lasky Fund purchase

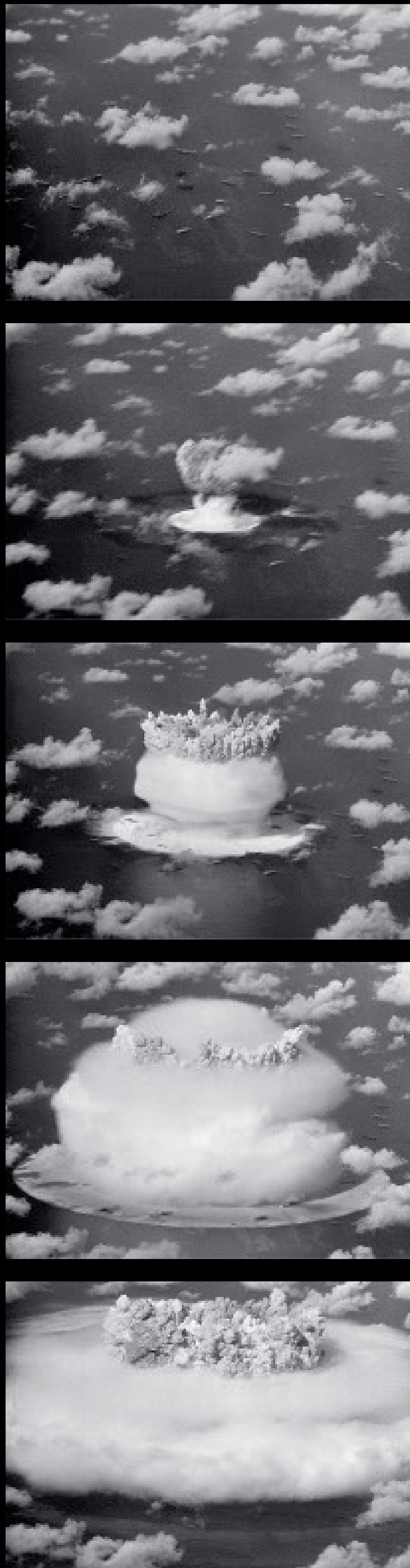


124 **UNFINISHED DRAWING** 1981–83 Ink on paper
9½ × 10⅜ in. (24.1 × 26.4 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Mary Heath Keesling Fund purchase

FOLLOWING PAGES: 125 **CROSSROADS** 1976 35mm film, black and white, sound, 37 min.
Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (Accessions Committee Fund purchase) and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, with the generous support of the New Art Trust

BIKINI ATOLL

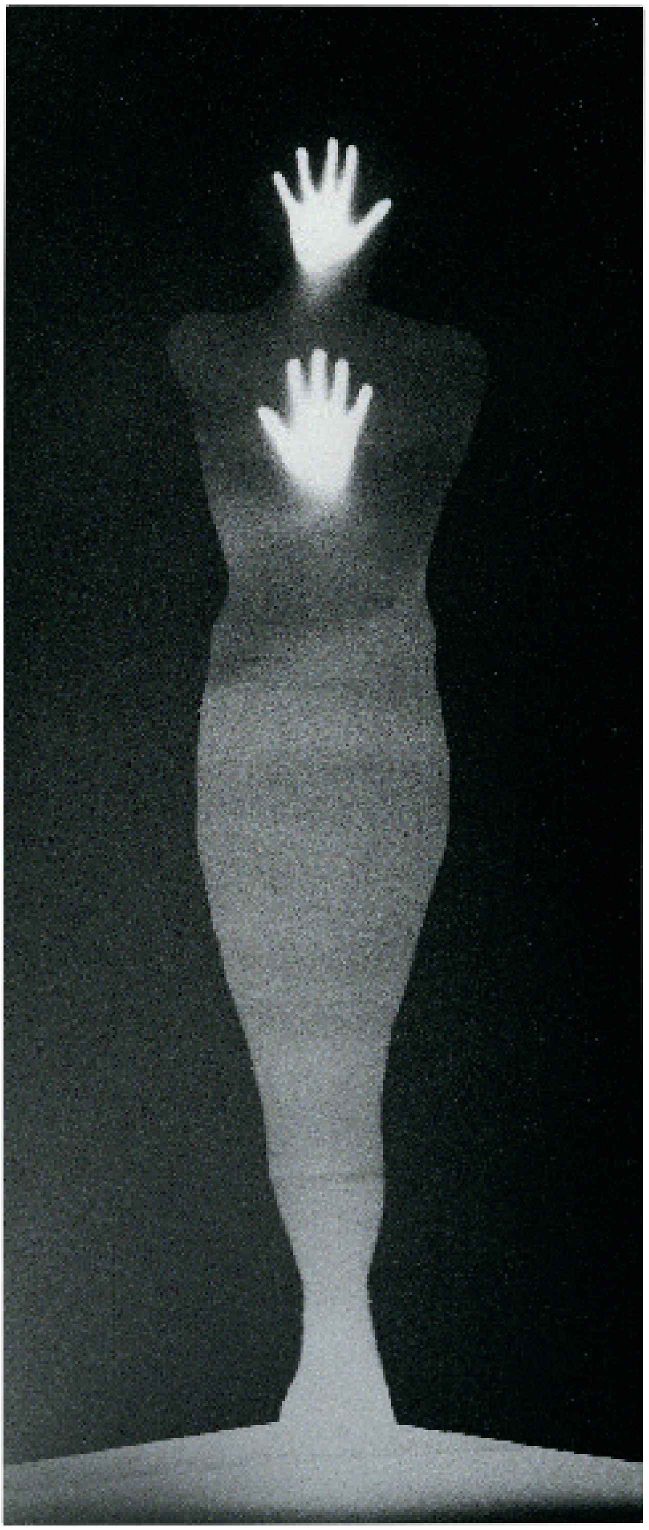












126 **SOUND OF ONE HAND ANGEL** 1974

Bruce Conner and Edmund Shea
Gelatin silver print
87 ¾ × 41 ¼ in. (222.9 × 104.8 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase

127 **SOUND OF TWO HAND ANGEL** 1974

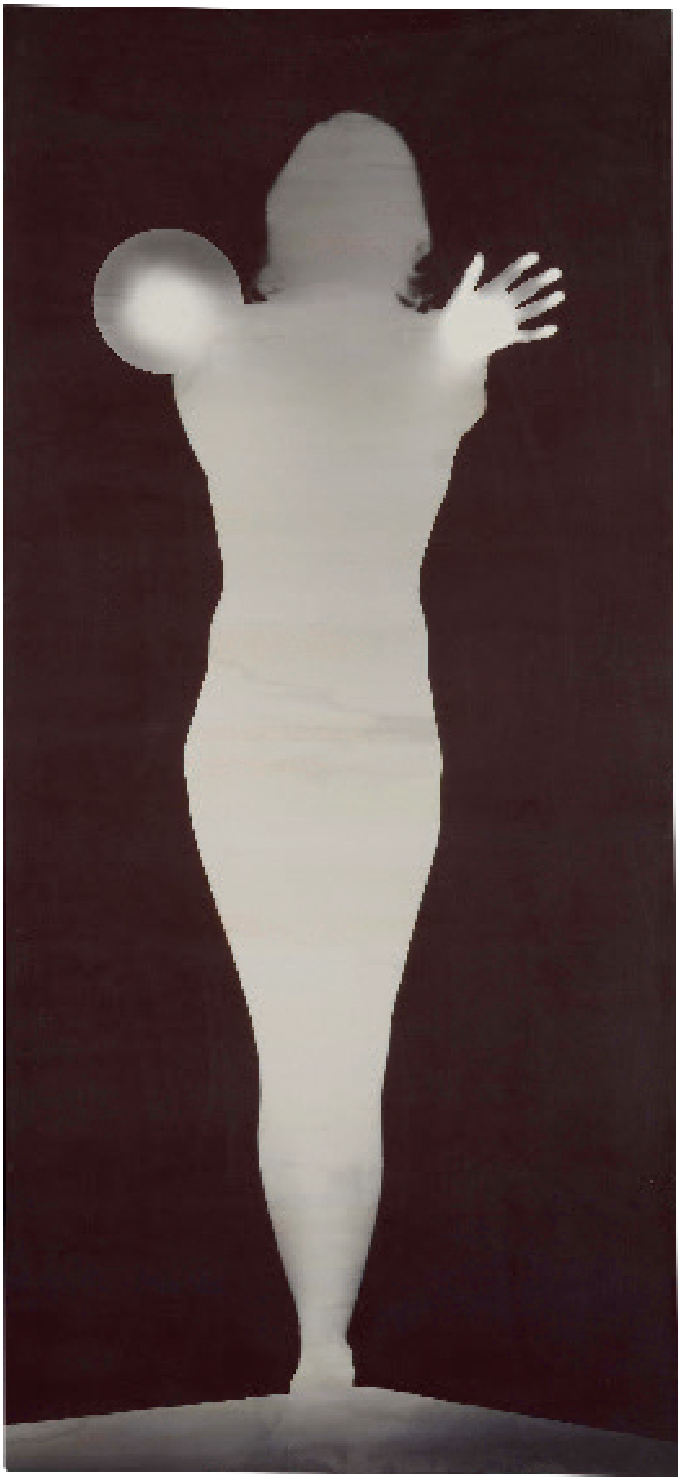
Bruce Conner and Edmund Shea
Gelatin silver print
88 × 37 in. (223.5 × 94 cm)
Collection of Tim Savinar and Patricia Unterman





128 **ANGEL** 1975
Bruce Conner and Edmund Shea
Gelatin silver print
85 × 39 in. (215.9 × 99.1 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, promised gift of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

129 **STARFINGER ANGEL** 1975
Bruce Conner and Edmund Shea
Gelatin silver print
85 × 39 in. (215.9 × 99.1 cm)
Musée national d'art moderne/Centre de création industrielle, Centre Pompidou, Paris

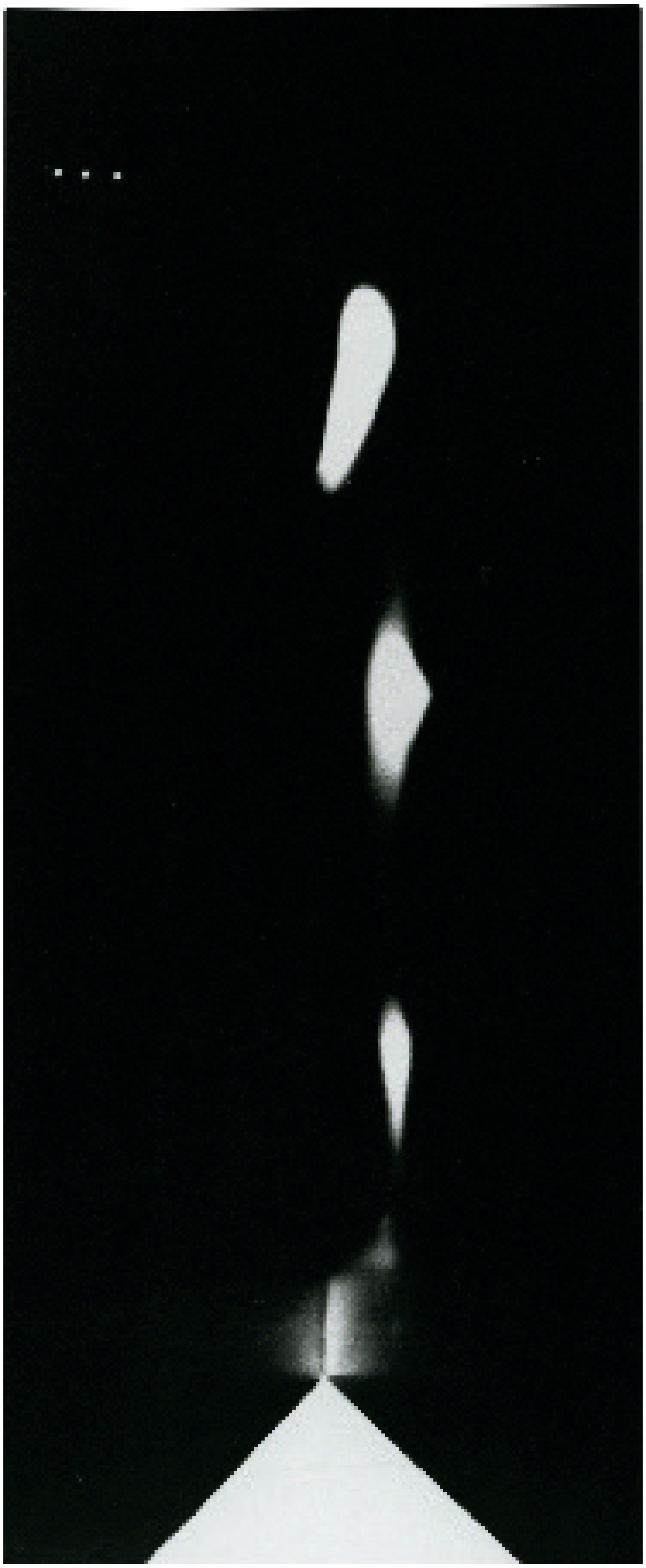




130 **ANGEL** 1975
Bruce Conner and Edmund Shea
Gelatin silver print
85 × 39 in. (215.9 × 99.1 cm)
Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Butler Family Fund, 1989

131 **ANGEL LIGHT** 1975
Bruce Conner and Edmund Shea
Gelatin silver print
85 × 39 in. (215.9 × 99.1 cm)
Promised gift of Shirley Ross Davis to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art





132 **ANGEL KISS** 1975
Bruce Conner and Edmund Shea
Gelatin silver print
96 × 40 in. (243.8 × 101.6 cm)
Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, California, gift of Paula and Phillip Kirkeby and the Modern and Contemporary Art Fund

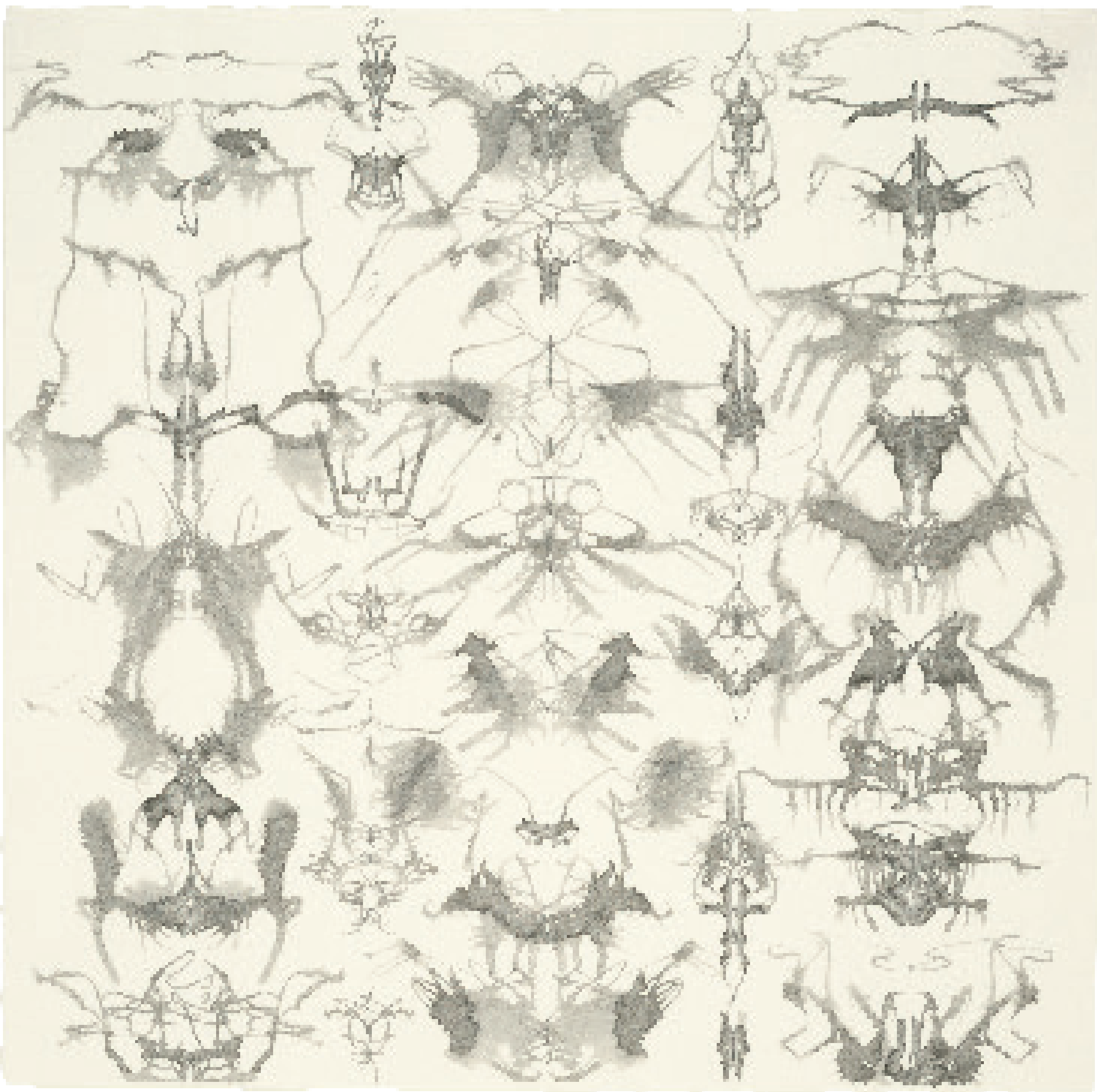
133 **FLAME ANGEL** 1975
Bruce Conner and Edmund Shea
Gelatin silver print
96 × 40 in. (243.8 × 101.6 cm)
Balkanski Family Collection





135 **INKBLOT DRAWING** August 24, 1975 Ink on paper
11⅛ × 9½ in. (28.3 × 24.1 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection, gift

134 **INKBLOT DRAWING** June 13, 1975 Ink on paper
10¾ × 9¾ in. (27.3 × 24.8 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust and Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles



136 **INKBLOT DRAWING** 1975 Ink on paper
11 1/4 × 11 1/4 in. (28.6 × 28.6 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Mortimer Fleishhacker, Jr. Memorial Fund purchase

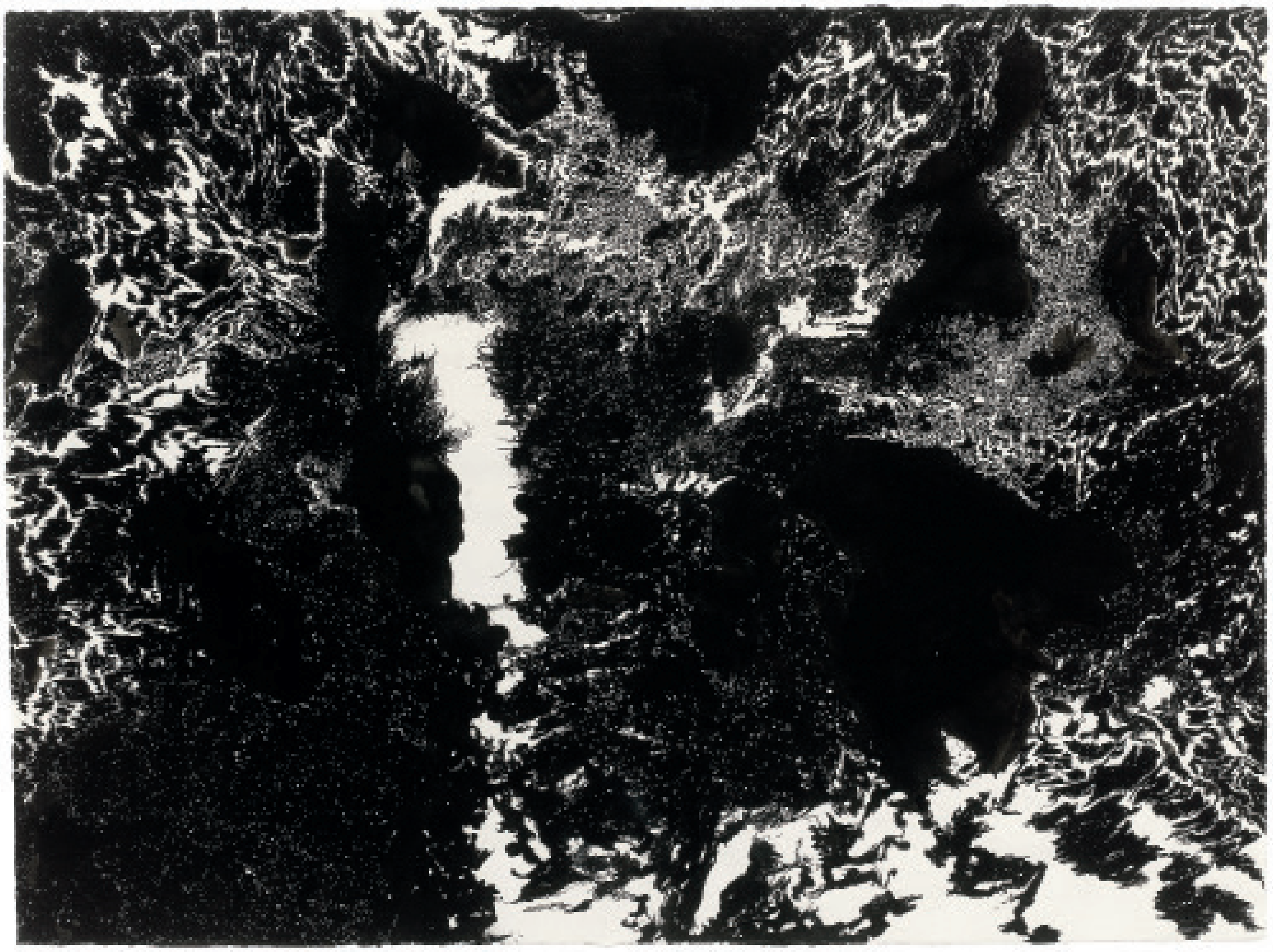


137 **GEORGE MELIES AND THE CAVERN OF THE KING OF GNOMES** September 14, 1975

Ink on paper
22 1/4 × 20 3/8 in. (56.5 × 51.8 cm)
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, gift of Sally and Wynn Kramarsky



138 **DREAMTIME IN TOTEMLAND** 1975 Ink on paper
22 ¼ × 20 ⅜ in. (56.5 × 51.8 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

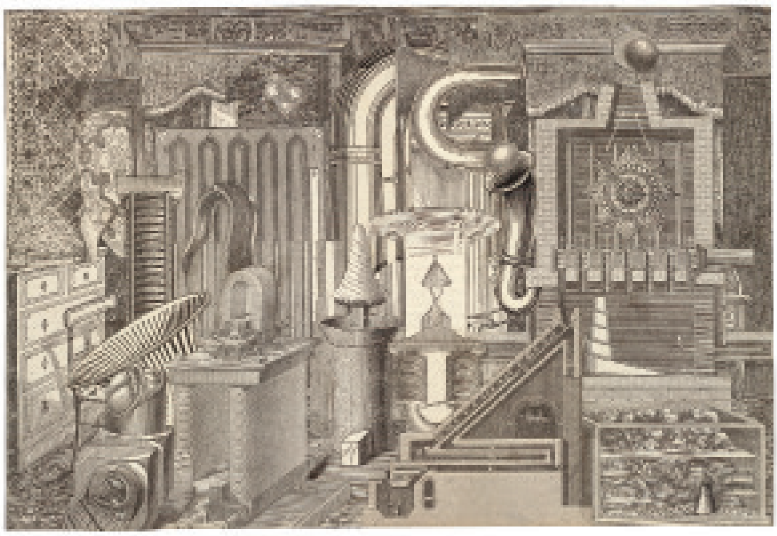


139 **UNTITLED** August 9, 1976 Ink on paper
22 ¼ × 29 ¾ in. (56.5 × 75.6 cm)
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, The Virginia Herrick Deknatel Purchase Fund



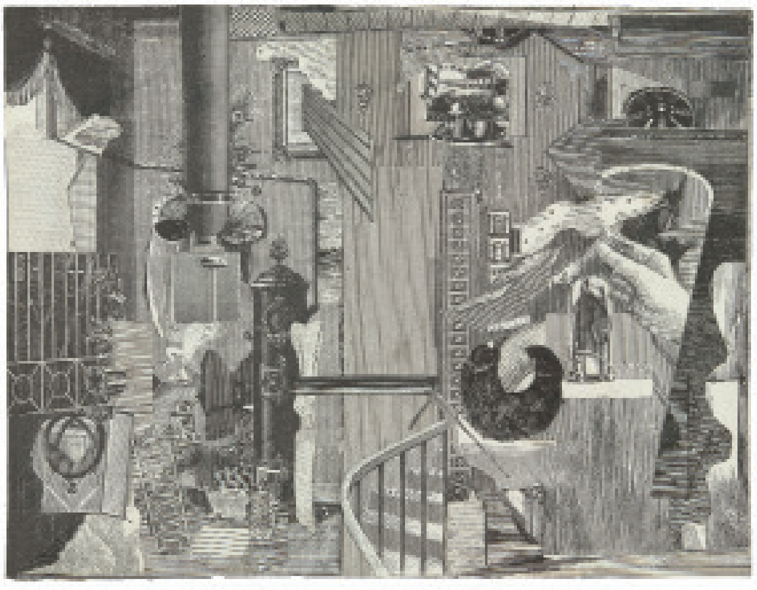
140 **UNTITLED (A)** January 12, 1976 Ink on paper
22 ⅛ × 14 ⅞ in. (56.2 × 37.8 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

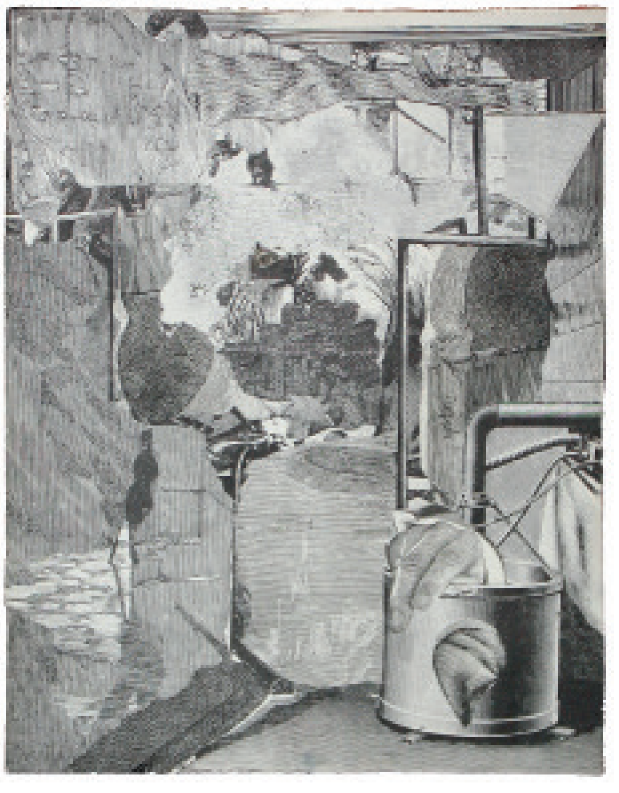




141 **MONUMENT [DHOMS I.1]** 1965 Collage of found illustrations
12 × 9 in. (30.5 × 22.9 cm)
Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody

142 **MUSIC ROOM [DHOMS I.2]** 1966 Collage of found illustrations
5 1/16 × 7 1/2 in. (12.9 × 19.1 cm)
Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Margaret Fisher Fund





143 **ROOM [DHOMS I.3]** 1966 Collage of found illustrations
4 ¾ × 6 ⅛ in. (12.1 × 15.6 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection, gift

144 **HAND [DHOMS I.4]** 1963 Collage of found illustrations
5 ¾ × 4 ⅜ in. (14.6 × 11.1 cm)
Collection of Frances Beatty and Allen Adler







145 **MEXICO CITY [DHOMS I.5]** 1962
Collage of found illustrations
4 3⁄8 × 3 5⁄8 in. (11.1 × 9.2 cm)
Collection of Pamela and Arthur Sanders

146 **HASHISH [DHOMS I.6]** 1961
Collage of found illustrations
4 3⁄4 × 5 1⁄2 in. (12.1 × 14 cm)
Collection of Robin Wright

147 **UNTITLED [DHOMS I.7]** 1964
Collage of found illustrations
3 7⁄8 × 6 3⁄4 in. (9.8 × 17.2 cm)
Collection of Shawn and Brook Byers



148 **MONUMENT [DHOMS I.8]** 1965 Collage of found illustrations
8 ½ × 6 in. (21.6 × 15.2 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy



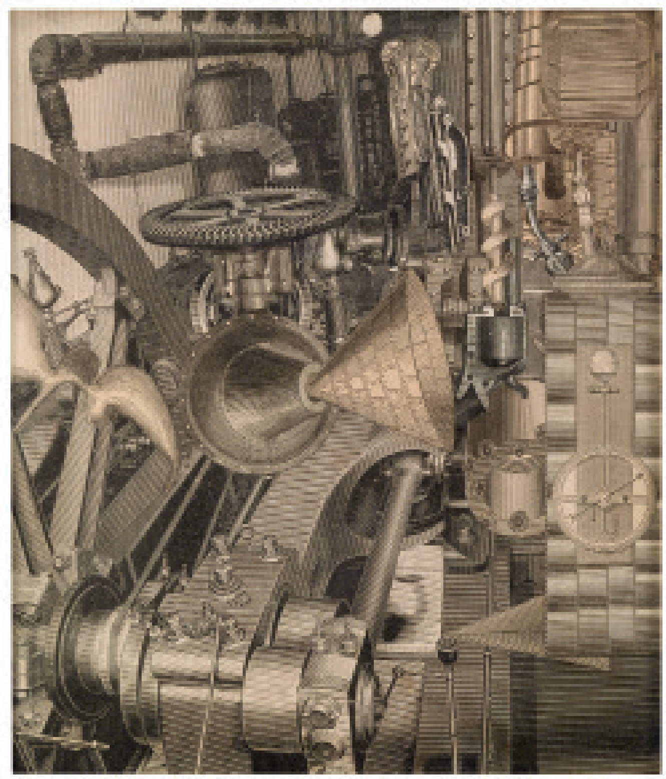


149 **CRIMINAL ACT [DHOMS II.1]** 1961 Collage of found illustrations
5 9⁄16 × 4 5⁄16 in. (14.1 × 11 cm)
Courtesy Miyake Fine Art, Tokyo

150 **UNTITLED [DHOMS II.2]** ca. 1960–65 Collage of found illustrations
7 1⁄4 × 6 in. (18.4 × 15.2 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy





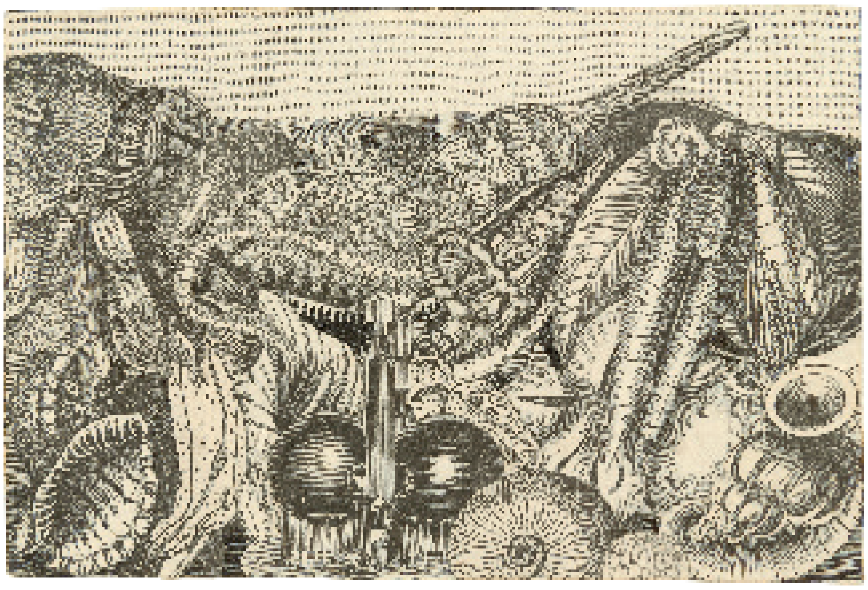


152 **UNTITLED [DHOMS II.4]** ca. 1960–65 Collage of found illustrations
6 × 6¼ in. (15.2 × 15.9 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

151 **UNTITLED [DHOMS II.3]** ca. 1960–65 Collage of found illustrations
9¾ × 7 in. (24.8 × 17.8 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

153 **UNTITLED [DHOMS II.5]** ca. 1960–65 Collage of found illustrations
6½ × 5½ in. (16.5 × 14 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy





154 **DISCOVERING A NEW PORT [DHOMS II.6]** 1961
Collage of found illustrations
4 7/8 × 3 3/4 in. (12.4 × 9.5 cm)
Collection of Dean Byington

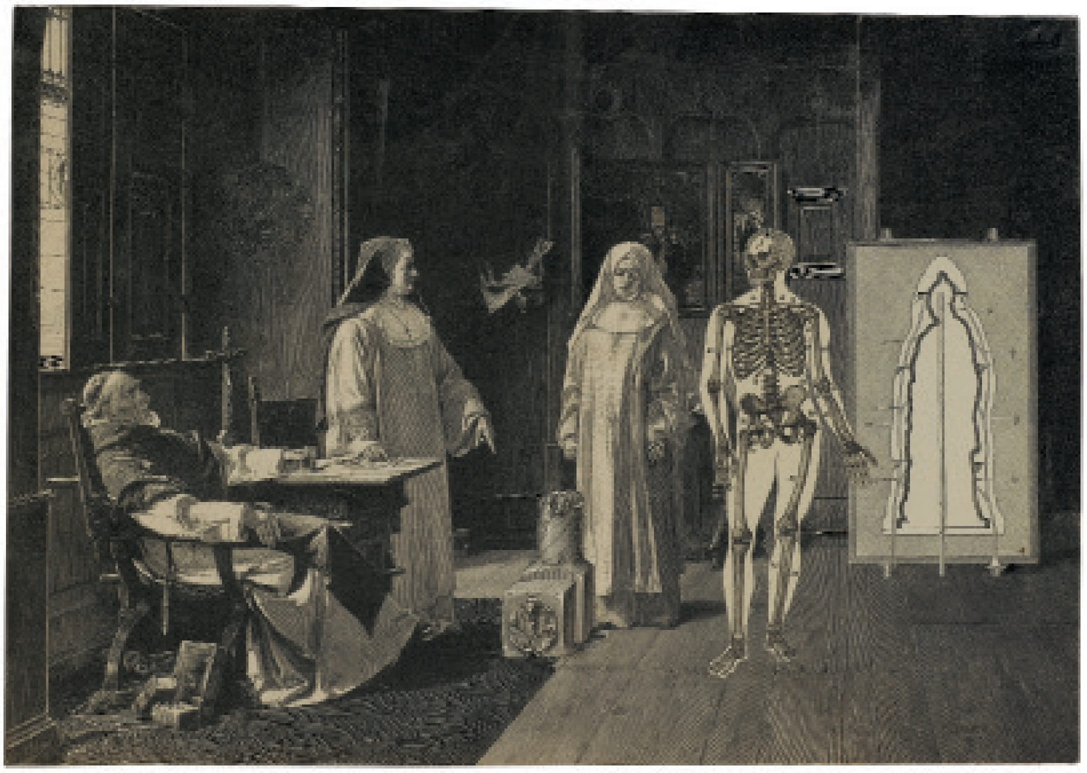
155 **UNTITLED (LANDSCAPE) [DHOMS II.7]** 1964
Collage of found illustrations
4 × 5 3/4 in. (10.2 × 14.6 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection, gift (purchase, and gift, in part, of The Eileen and Michael Cohen Collection)





156 **UNTITLED (LANDSCAPE) [DHOMS II.9]** 1964
Collage of found illustrations
6 × 8 in. (15.2 × 20.3 cm)
Collection of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson

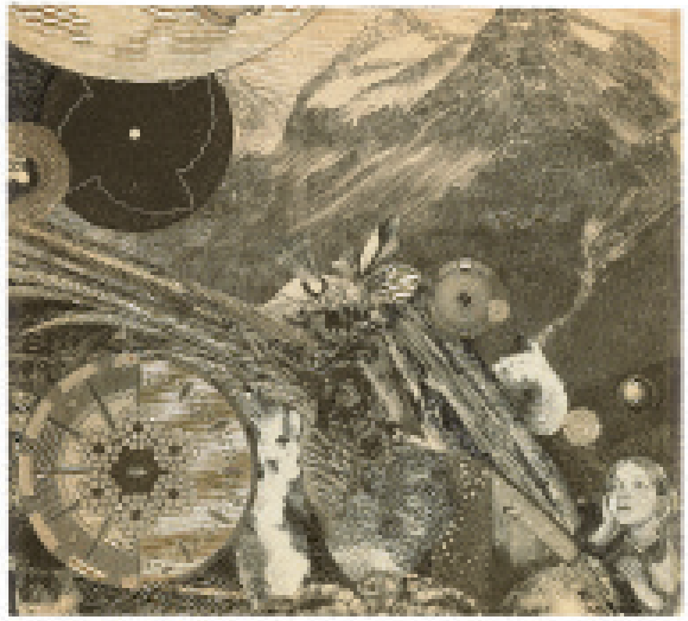
157 **EL DIA [DHOMS II.10]** 1961
Collage of found illustrations
6 ¼ × 8 ⅝ in. (15.9 × 21.9 cm)
Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, museum purchase: Helen Foresman Spencer Art Acquisition Fund

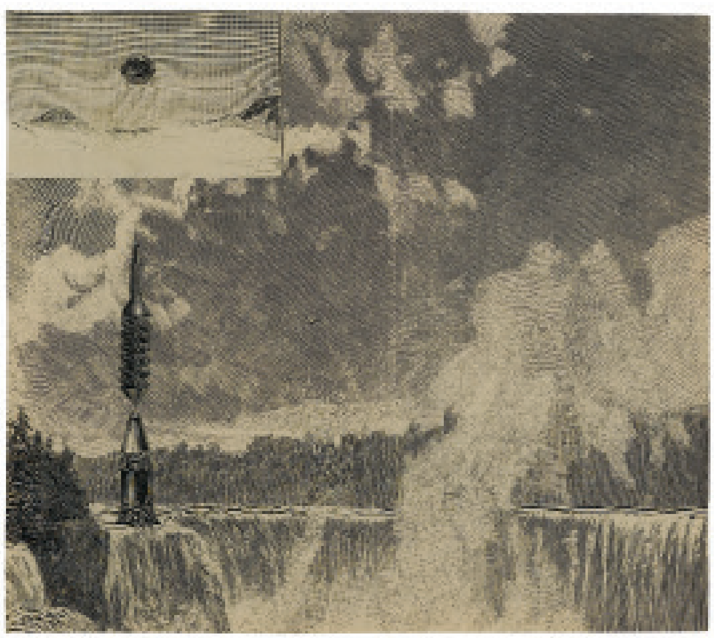




158 **UNTITLED [DHOMS III.1]** ca. 1960 Collage of found illustrations
8 15/16 × 12 11/16 in. (22.7 × 32.2 cm)
Ringier Collection, Switzerland

159 **UNTITLED [DHOMS III.2]** ca. 1960–65 Collage of found illustrations
6 1/2 × 10 1/2 in. (16.5 × 26.7 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

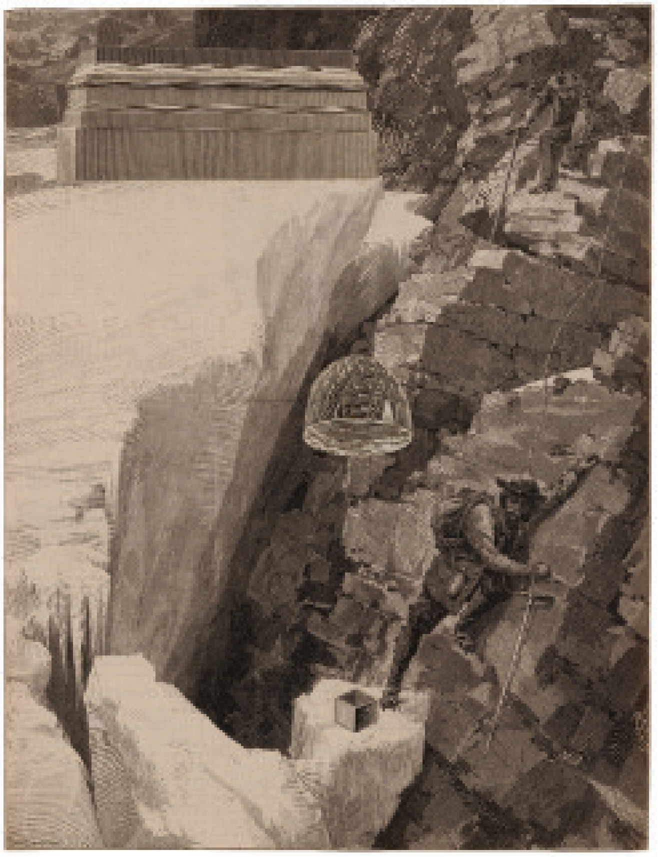




160 **UNTITLED [DHOMS III.3]** ca. 1960–65 Collage of found illustrations
5 ¾ × 6 ½ in. (14.6 × 16.5 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

161 **UNTITLED [DHOMS III.4]** ca. 1960 Collage of found illustrations
5 5/16 × 5 15/16 in. (13.5 × 15.1 cm)
Ringier Collection, Switzerland







162 **UNTITLED [DHOMS III.5]** ca. 1960–65 Collage of found illustrations
6 1/4 × 8 1/4 in. (15.9 × 21 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

163 **DISCOVERY [DHOMS III.7]** 1966 Collage of found illustrations
11 5/8 × 8 15/16 in. (29.5 × 22.7 cm)
Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut, Storrs

164 **ISOLATION [DHOMS III.8]** 1966 Collage of found illustrations
9 5/8 × 13 9/16 in. (24.5 × 34.5 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy



165 **DENNIS HOPPER ONE MAN SHOW, Volume I, Volume II, Volume III** 1971–73

Etchings in bound volumes
Twenty-six etchings; volume I (closed): 18 ½ × 15 ½ in. (47 × 39.4 cm); volume II (closed): 20 × 17 ¼ in. (50.8 × 43.8 cm); volume III (closed): 24 × 19 ¼ in. (61 × 48.9 cm)
Published by Crown Point Press
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Riva Castleman Endowment Fund



41



42



43

41 TONI BASIL IN FRONT OF MABUHAY GARDENS, April 3, 1978, from 26 PUNK PHOTOS, 1978, printed 1985 (pl. 168)

42 MONGOLOID, 1978 (still). 16mm, black and white, sound, 3:30 min. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

43 *Search & Destroy*, no. 5 (1978), featuring Bruce Conner's photograph of Devo performing at the Mabuhay Gardens on the back cover

In the mid-1970s Conner embarked on a new group of dense ink drawings punctured by pinpoints of white paper that resemble stars in a night sky (pls. 116–22). During this period he also created the ANGEL photograms (1973–75, see pls. 126–33 and 255) in collaboration with his longtime friend the photographer Edmund Shea.[109] "The ANGELS occurred at a time when I didn't feel comfortable with what I was doing in drawing, films, or whatever else I was doing at the time," he said. "I was feeling very nebulous about my own identity, and uncertain how to cope with that. The main thing that I could understand was that I had a body that I could never get out of."[110] Conner's original idea was to use photograms to create life-size shadow images that he would carry with him into the world, a concept that recalls the portable RATBASTARDs of the late 1950s. He found that the photograms were effective in their own right, and he eventually produced twenty-nine in various sizes and compositions. Poet Bill Berkson has described these haunting images as "self-portraits in a time of crisis."[111]

Conner in 1975 began his first sustained experiments with inkblots (pls. 134–38), which would later supersede the dense mandalas and star fields to become his primary drawing technique.[112] By the late 1970s he had reached an impasse with his earlier allover style, as evidenced by the tellingly, if apocryphally, titled LAST DRAWING (1976–80, pl. 123). He was further frustrated by negotiations with SFMOMA over a never-to-be realized retrospective of his work.[113] Thus the time was right when, in October 1977, Toni Basil encouraged him to see the band Devo perform at the Mabuhay Gardens, described by Greil Marcus as "a moribund Filipino cabaret spot flanked by strip joints" where local punk bands had begun to perform the previous year (fig. 41).[114]

109 In addition to the ANGELS, Shea took numerous photographs of Conner over the years, including one of the artist in an army uniform, which served as the body of BOMBHEAD (1989, pl. 179).

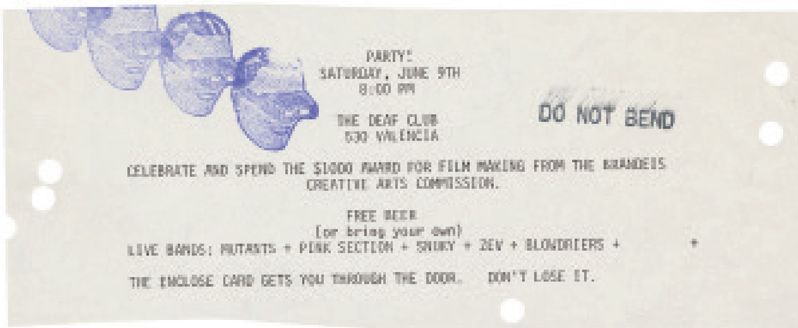
110 Conner, interview by Rothfuss, Nov. 14, 1997, 31.

111 Bill Berkson, "Bruce Conner at San Francisco MOMA," *Art in America* 80, no. 11 (Nov. 1992): 149.

112 Conner would eventually produce more than five hundred inkblots drawings in a wide range of sizes and styles.

113 One of the central conflicts arose when Conner demanded the museum's director, Henry Hopkins, either forgo charging a special admission fee for the exhibition or share the proceeds with the artist. Letter from Bruce Conner to Henry Hopkins, July 27, 1977, BCP. Conner also was concerned that he would be barred from making alterations to his work. See "In Conversation: Bruce Conner with John Yau."

114 Greil Marcus, "Conner: Punk," in *Bruce Conner: Mabuhay Gardens*, exh. cat. (Düsseldorf: NRW-Forum Kultur und Wirtschraft, 2006), 14.



PARTY!
SATURDAY, JUNE 9TH
8:00 PM

THE DEAF CLUB
530 VALENCIA

DO NOT BEND

CELEBRATE AND SPEND THE $1000 AWARD FOR FILM MAKING FROM THE BRANDEIS CREATIVE ARTS COMMISSION.

FREE BEER
(or bring your own)

LIVE BANDS: MUTANTS + PINK SECTION + SNUKY + ZEV + BLOWDRIERS +

THE ENCLOSE CARD GETS YOU THROUGH THE DOOR. DON'T LOSE IT.

44

44 Invitation to Bruce Conner's party at the Deaf Club, San Francisco, 1979. Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

That night Conner met V. Vale, who asked the artist if he would contribute to his incipient punk zine, *Search and Destroy.* Conner resolved to take photographs for one year: "Do a document of what happened during that period of time, what changes take place: the geography of the Mabuhay Gardens" (fig. 43 and pls. 168 and 169).[115] He likened his navigation of the turbulent scene to "combat photography,"[116] reveling in its rebellious spirit: "I was attracted to the phenomenon of the punk scene because it had a lot of the same kind of energy that seemed to exist in the 1950s in San Francisco when artists and various people were called the Beat Generation."[117] A certain amount of continuity links Conner's Mabuhay photographs and his Beat-era assemblages. As Solnit has observed: "The torn stockings of a punkette, the layers of tattered posters on a telephone pole—suggest one reason for his attraction to the scene. Punk was an aesthetic of corrosion, repulsion, and pessimism with an undercurrent of outraged idealism that Conner had anticipated by decades."[118]

Conner immersed himself in the tumultuous scene. He said that he was "equipped with kneepads, work-boots, and an instinct for self-preservation during slam-dancing and mass movements on the floor," but he still found himself in a leg cast on at least one occasion.[119] Conner continued to visit punk clubs even after his photo assignment for *Search and Destroy* ended. In June 1979 he threw a party at the Deaf Club in San Francisco's Mission District, inviting guests to "celebrate and spend the $1000 award" for filmmaking that he had just received from Brandeis University's Creative Arts Awards Commission (fig. 44). A feature in the punk magazine *Damage* a few months later claimed that the artist and his interviewer had "follow[ed] coffee with beer chasers and a listen to the new Plugz album" at the kitchen table in Conner's tidy home in the Glen Park neighborhood of San Francisco.[120] "Making art is not a part of my life now," he told the magazine.[121] Conner created just one work in 1979, a brick wrapped in an Ace bandage (pl. 170). He said he "made the mistake once of buying a lifetime supply of expanded consciousness. And I started developing all these sort of infant consciousnesses, little tiny ones," that would carry out "all kinds of 'creative' endeavors." "The only way I can knock them out," he added, "is to become an alcoholic. It's possible to destroy an enormous number of brain cells by drinking alcohol and taking important drugs and abusing yourself physically."[122]

115 Conner quoted in Marcus, "Conner: Punk."

116 Ibid., 15.

117 Conner in Obrist and Kvaran, "Interview: Bruce Conner," 18.

118 Rebecca Solnit, "Intrepid Chameleon," *Artweek*, Mar. 15, 1986, 11.

119 Bruce Conner quoted in the press release for the exhibition *Bruce Conner: Mabuhay Gardens*, 1978, held at Smith Andersen Gallery, Palo Alto, California, Feb. 19–Mar. 22, 1986.

120 Bruce Conner in Mia Culpa, "Bruce Conner" (interview), part 1, *Damage* 1, no. 2 (Aug.–Sept. 1979): 8.

121 Ibid., 10.

122 Ibid., 8.

Conner in the 1990s revisited the excesses of this period in a group of photocopy collages memorializing punks from his Mabuhay days who had later died from drug overdoses. The impetus for these collages appears to have been the death in August 1996 of Frankie Fix, cofounder of the band Crime (pls. 171, 174, and 178). Fix was a "superstar in his own mind," says former bandmate Henry S. Rosenthal (a.k.a. Hank Rank); what he lacked in musicianship he made up for in style and showmanship.[123] This preoccupation with appearances must have resonated with Conner, for whom identity and its construction were central concerns.

The "dead punks"—especially RICKY WILLIAMS DEAD PUNK: NOVEMBER 21, 1992 (1997, pl. 173), which incorporates medical tubing and a hospital bracelet—also allude to the artist's own confrontation with mortality. In 1984 Conner was diagnosed with sclerosing cholangitis, a severe congenital liver disorder that left him chronically fatigued, compelling him to adopt a strict regimen of sleep and work. He once told poet John Yau: "Dreams are a large part of my life since my liver disability payments come in the form of nine to eleven hours of unavoidable sleep each day."[124]

. . .

If Conner appears to have produced little work during the mid-1980s, it is not attributable to his illness alone. Rather, he was consumed during this period with the production of a feature-length documentary film about the legendary gospel quartet the Soul Stirrers. A longtime fan of gospel music, he made regular trips with Jean to Noah's Ark Gospel Chateau in Richmond, California, northeast of San Francisco. There he met Reverend Paul Foster Sr., an original member of the Soul Stirrers, whom Conner described as "a great hero of mine."[125] What began as an effort to help Foster organize a reunion concert quickly evolved into a film project as well (see fig. 45 and p. 191).

In a review of the concert, which took place at Noah's Ark on February 19, 1984, the *San Francisco Chronicle* described it as "a sublimely special night in Richmond" and reported that it had been "shot by experimental filmmaker Bruce Conner in his first documentary effort."[126] Conner had enlisted Henry Rosenthal as his producer. Rosenthal recalls that Conner, who also hired professional cameramen and cinematographers, seemed overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of the shoot: "It wasn't in his nature to direct such a thing."[127] Conner appears to have been undeterred, however, as he further escalated the production.

Between 1983 and 1987, having decided to interleave the story of the Soul Stirrers with the history of the civil rights movement, Conner amassed dozens of hours of original and archival

123 Henry S. Rosenthal, telephone conversation with the author, June 15, 2015.

124 Bruce Conner in John Yau, "Dream Time in Totemland: A Faxed Conversation between Bruce Conner and John Yau," *Fence* 1, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 1998): 84.

125 Bruce Conner in Chuck Hudina, "Visitor in the World: Bruce Conner Interviewed," *Release Print* 9, no. 1 (Mar. 1986): 6. See also Jean Conner, interviews by Conway, 14–16.

126 Joel Selvin, "A Sublimely Special Night in Richmond," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Feb. 22, 1984.

127 Henry S. Rosenthal, conversation with the author, Rudolf Frieling, and Gary Garrels, May 18, 2015, San Francisco.



45

45 Bruce Conner in his studio, May 1985. Photograph by Terry Lorant. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

footage. In July 1984 he told a collector, "I have decided to direct all funds raised through the exchange of my artwork to the film project: THE SOUL STIRRERS: BY AND BY."[128] At the end of 1986 he wrote to his friend the painter Sam Francis: "My movie about the Soul Stirrers must be completed. They are important to me."[129] But Conner appears to have been stymied by the process of securing music rights, a prerequisite for what he envisioned as his first mainstream film. Moreover, his working process was ill suited to the project's scale: He told Rosenthal that he edited film at a rate of one minute per month. Although he revisited THE SOUL STIRRERS many times over the years, the film was ultimately never completed.[130]

. . .

In the decades following his diagnosis, Conner produced scores of engraving collages and inkblot drawings, an accomplishment that is all the more remarkable in light of his physical limitations. Perhaps it is fitting that these two techniques were themselves defined by constraints. "I restrict the game," he said of the collages. "I don't reduce or enlarge the images." Yet the works' elements were "a constant entertainment for me as I moved them around and transformed them into one thing or another."[131] The process of creating the inkblot drawings was similarly characterized by freedom within boundaries: "It's determined ahead of time where the inkblots will be placed and organized. A ruler is used to mark out the page and an implement to score the paper. Sometimes it starts as preplanned, but then it may be altered very soon after the process starts. . . . The paper is folded and a miracle occurs."[132]

128 Letter from Bruce Conner to Lydia Titcomb, July 21, 1984, BCP.

129 Letter from Bruce Conner to Sam Francis, Dec. 27, 1986, Paula Kirkeby/Smith Andersen Gallery Collection of Bruce Conner, 1964–2001, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

130 In 2006 he released one completed segment, HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW, originally intended as a set piece within the larger film.

131 Conner in Kohn, "An Interview with Bruce Conner," n.p.

132 Bruce Conner in Jack Rasmussen, "Interview: Bruce Conner, Jack Rasmussen," in *After Bruce Conner: Anonymous, Anonymouse, and Emily Feather*, exh. cat., ed. Rasmussen (Washington, D.C.: American University Museum, Katzen Arts Center, 2005), 7.

Narrative chronology continues on page 260

NOTES ON THE SOUL STIRRERS: BY AND BY

Henry S. Rosenthal

The gospel music documentary THE SOUL STIRRERS: BY AND BY is Bruce Conner's great unfinished work. In scale, scope, and ambition, it represents the confluence of Bruce's artistic, musical, and philosophical investigations. In a career based in large part on irreverence, the motivation for BY AND BY was profound reverence.

I met Bruce in San Francisco in 1977 when I was drumming in the punk band Crime. Bruce was deep in the punk scene but also attended regular Sunday services at the Union Baptist Church in Vallejo, California, and had befriended the Reverend Paul Foster Sr., a former member of the gospel group the Soul Stirrers. The Soul Stirrers began as church singers in Trinity, Texas, in 1926, and went on to pioneer innovative vocal techniques and arrangements that greatly influenced popular music. They were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1989. During private conversations, Rev. Foster shared his dream of reuniting with the remaining members of the Soul Stirrers from their golden era in the 1940s and 1950s. Bruce committed to assisting in organizing a reunion concert, and for this he sought my help.

We began contacting the remaining elderly, geographically scattered members, raising money to assemble them, and securing a venue. Paul Foster and his son, Paul Jr., were involved with Noah's Ark Gospel Chateau, a gospel music nightclub in nearby Richmond, California. As plans came together for a performance there in 1984, we realized the urgency of capturing and preserving what promised to be a concert of great historic value. Bruce and I became film producers without knowing very much about what the job entailed.

The Soul Stirrers Reunion Group consisted of three members from the golden era: founder S. R. Crain, legendary lead singer Rebert H. Harris, and Rev. Foster. Sam Cooke had been killed in 1964, and his sound and presence in the group were sorely missed. We were fortunate to find a young singer living in Oakland who sang in the style of Cooke, to the delight of the reunion group (and eventually the audience). In addition to the headlining Reunion Soul Stirrers, we also filmed the Noah's Ark Specials, a supergroup led by Paul Foster Jr. of the best local singers and players, and the Soul Stirrers of Chicago, a touring group fronted by guitarist Leroy Crume.

Bruce was uncomfortable directing our large crew over the wireless communication system, so he ran around the room giving instructions to cameramen directly. We did not have centralized monitoring, so our five cameras, while synced, were shooting independently and unsupervised. What returned from the film laboratory days later was a well-covered, well-recorded concert featuring strong performances from all the groups, but it lacked context. Bruce's vision for the film had expanded, and he hoped to use the Soul Stirrers' story as a window onto the parallel story of the civil rights movement in America. Their journey from segregation and persecution to acceptance and fame mirrored the changing social climate over the decades and presented a unique opportunity to lace together micro and macro vantage points. We decided to tell the story of the Soul Stirrers from their inception in 1926 right through to the present.

We began with Rev. Foster. We filmed him in his Union Baptist Church as he led the choir in Sunday services, participated in prayer meetings, visited the sick, and relaxed with friends and relatives. Next we assembled a crew to travel to Texas to the home of S. R. Crain, who led us to the birthplace of the group and regaled us with stories of the early days. Finally, we shot in Chicago at the home of Rebert H. Harris, who led a group of young singers in scenes showing the master singer paying it forward to the next generation of gospel singers.

With more than sixty hours of 16mm film already shot, Bruce purchased a flatbed editing platform and began to put it all together. Bruce had told me that he usually worked at a rate of one minute of completed screen time per month of editing time. I calculated that for a feature-length film, that would mean Bruce would spend seven years(!) in the editing room. Bruce's technique was precise—and maddening. He would make a single cut, joining two pieces of film together with a piece of clear editing tape. Then he would watch that single cut about one hundred times. Then he might remove a *single frame* of film from either side of the cut and watch that another hundred times. Then he might put the frame *back in* and watch it *another hundred times.* Working to adapt his techniques to the demands of this new style of filmmaking, Bruce created over the course of several years significant edits toward a finished film. But for Bruce these were rough assemblies and only hinted at the grand vision he held.

Bruce was an artist who claimed to only be able to create when all the materials needed for a work were present and available to him, whether it was found footage, collage fragments, or the right ink, paper, or paste for his inkblots. From the beginning of the Soul Stirrers project, the issue of music rights was crucial. We soon discovered that none of the singers involved in the group had ownership or control over the songs, even though they had composed, arranged, and performed them. Most of the rights belonged to Allen Klein, the legendary businessman known for simultaneously managing both the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and for creating ABKCO Music and Records, the company that had acquired the songs we sought. Bruce insisted that he needed unrestricted access to the material "in perpetuity throughout the universe" before he could complete the film. I had a single phone conversation about rights with Klein, who was known as a tough and aggressive negotiator. My attempts to determine if archival footage of Sam Cooke performing with the Soul Stirrers ever existed, and if Klein had it, were deftly dodged, and my preliminary attempts to negotiate rights were rebuffed.

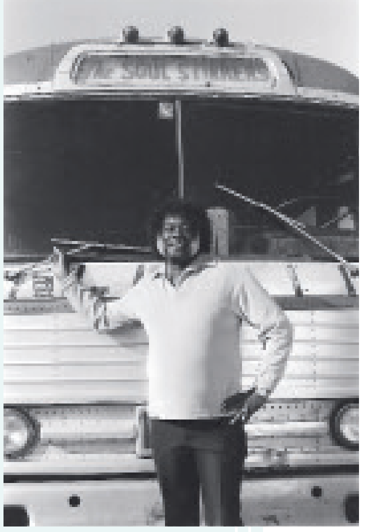
In retrospect, that conversation was a turning point for our film. Bruce realized he would not have complete freedom to include and edit all the songs we had recorded.



1



2



3

1 Bruce Conner with Rebert H. Harris, 1985. Photograph by Henry S. Rosenthal

2 Soul Stirrers Reunion group, 1984. Photograph by Henry S. Rosenthal

3 Leroy Crume with the Soul Stirrers bus, 1984. Photograph by Henry S. Rosenthal

Despite my assurances to Bruce that I was confident I could obtain rights after his ideal edit was achieved, he felt demoralized by and mistrustful of the whole process of legitimate filmmaking practices, conventions he had devoted a career to subverting and undermining. The project lost steam, and Bruce returned to simple, solitary artworks he could complete in isolation at his worktable.

Bruce came back to the Soul Stirrers project at intervals and often in secret, his preferred mode of creating. Around 2005 he visited the National Archives in Washington, D.C., where he had obtained the footage from which he created CROSSROADS (1976, pl. 125), to look for footage to create a set piece that was more in character with his body of work, images cut to music. For HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW (2006), he used a vintage recording of the Soul Stirrers performing the gospel standard of the same name, along with footage we shot of Crain and Harris to introduce the song. This imagery then dissolved into a dreamy montage of images. To date, this is the only completed, publicly presented work containing footage from the Soul Stirrers project.

FOLLOWING PAGE: 166

AMERICA IS WAITING 1981

16mm film, black and white, sound, 3:30 min.

Courtesy Conner Family Trust


HERO
What can be done
about Larry's
personal problems?

VISUAL SAMPLER 1.0

David Byrne

I first saw Bruce's films made from found footage when I was in art school in the early 1970s, and I loved them immediately. I had a catalogue from Canyon Cinema—a truly indie film distributor—that I would pore over back then: I'd read the descriptions of the work of Michael Snow, Stan Brakhage, Andy Warhol, and Bruce. Bruce's works were the most immediately accessible—they had pop music and lots of humor, and we all recognized the style of the old bits of educational and government films that he'd used as material. It was early visual sampling. A few seconds of an old bit of footage in this new context was, to a viewer, analogous to a visual and cultural shorthand—the tropes of propaganda, newsreels, sad educational films, and industrial promos were all familiar. They evoked a time, an era, and a naive cultural sensibility we all knew well. And the repurposing effect! By shifting the use and context of these artifacts, it shifted what was once boring and mundane toward something now joyously funky and sublime. The cuts were often fast and were sometimes interrupted by flash frames and bits of leader. There was an almost stroboscopic effect, a visual assault, an image barrage. No one who saw these films ever forgot them.

Years later, around 1980, I was in a recording studio with Brian Eno in Los Angeles. We were working on what would become *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (a record with exclusively found vocals—no coincidence, I think), and we met up with Toni Basil, the choreographer. I was a huge fan of the Lockers, the dance group she created to showcase the amazing talents of a group of local street dancers (I'd seen them on *Soul Train*). She showed us some videos of the newer dancers that were coming up—the Electric Boogaloos, they were called. Brian and I loved this stuff. Their movements—popping and locking—were robotic and fluid at the same time, a uniting of what are usually viewed as opposite kinds of movement. They taught Michael Jackson some of his moves, like the moonwalk.

Toni mentioned in passing that she was friends with Bruce, who had been part of a whole crazy California art scene that included Dennis Hopper, Wallace Berman, Ken Price, and the *Semina* magazine crowd, all of whom for years were kept out of the narrative of contemporary art by the New York–based guardians of culture. Toni had been in one of his films, too—BREAKAWAY (1966, pl. 20)—dancing naked and backward. When Brian and I left L.A. and continued the recording sessions in San Francisco, I arranged to meet Bruce to see if found footage could meet found vocals.

Bruce showed us more of his films. CROSSROADS (1976, pl. 125) was a rare long one that repurposed armed forces footage of atomic bomb tests as ominous ecstatic cinema. The death cloud expands in what seems like slow motion (it's not) as planes circle above, filming the blossoming flower of death. We're torn between surrendering to the trancelike effect of the music and image and intellectually knowing what horror we are looking at. When I met him, around 1980, Bruce had been hanging around the Mabuhay Gardens, a Filipino restaurant that hosted punk bands in San Francisco. He was photographing that scene, which was more intense than the punk scene I knew from a few years earlier in New York. The West Coast bands seemed to want to outdo what had happened in New York, and to push it further. On the West Coast it was more physical and seemed more dangerous. There was also in San Francisco a thread connecting the past with the present, a line connecting the Beats and the hippies to the punks and eventually the DIY computer crowd. Each subculture there influenced the next one.

Bruce was a provocateur and a prankster. In some ways the films were just done for fun—no one was making any money on independent shorts in those days. But it was serious fun. Bruce was an anarchist who would subvert his own art shows, a way of commenting on the gallery world. For folks like me and the members of Devo, who had worked with Bruce as well, his films made perfect sense—here, we saw, was a joyous and provocative way to combine film and our music. Bruce's films were music videos before such things existed. They were the perfect complement to the music of that time. Their wildness and knowing references had the same anarchic attitude as much of what was going on in the more experimental fringes of pop.

MTV was just starting up around the time I met Bruce, and the network was desperate for content. I imagined that this was the time for Bruce's work to be seen. The right platform for it had finally arrived. (MTV played videos nonstop in those days.) So Brian and I gave him some tracks with a suggestion that he might find music with found vocals and found footage a natural combination: we picked "Mea Culpa" and "America Is Waiting" from our upcoming record. Would MTV play videos that didn't have the artists in them? Videos that were all made of found footage? Maybe they would? Who knew? They were desperate for content!

Bruce's realization of MEA CULPA (1981, pl. 167) is largely made up of footage from old educational science films about the laws of thermodynamics. We see circles and dots, representing molecules, vibrating (to the music) and bouncing off one another with manic intensity in a confined space. The bouncing molecules take on lifelike qualities—little critters in a pressure cooker, or, in another section, like some itchy Malevich square vibrating and quivering in anticipation . . . of what? It was wonderful, hilarious (to the extent that essentially abstract art could be hilarious), thrilling, and I was flattered that Bruce made it work.

AMERICA IS WAITING (1981, pl. 166) is shorter, has a funkier beat, and the images from the sales and instructional films he used are witty and hilarious. How, I asked myself, could MTV not play these? Enter what would soon become the plague of the sampling generation.

Brian and I delayed our record release until we had clearance from the sources of our found vocals (one was denied, but most sources couldn't figure out what in the world we were even asking), but Bruce, of course, never cleared anything. MTV didn't air

either of Bruce's films. My guess was because they, and maybe more so Warner Bros., who put out the record, were worried (somewhat justifiably) about some old newsreel company going after a major label with deep pockets for appropriating some ancient footage. Internet trolls before the Internet. It was a reasonable fear but frustrating for us nonetheless.

Where *did* Bruce's footage come from? He purchased cheap old newsreels, educational films, and condensed versions of old movies. He got them from the National Archives and the Prelinger Archives, which include many of those hilarious corporate motivational and sales films.

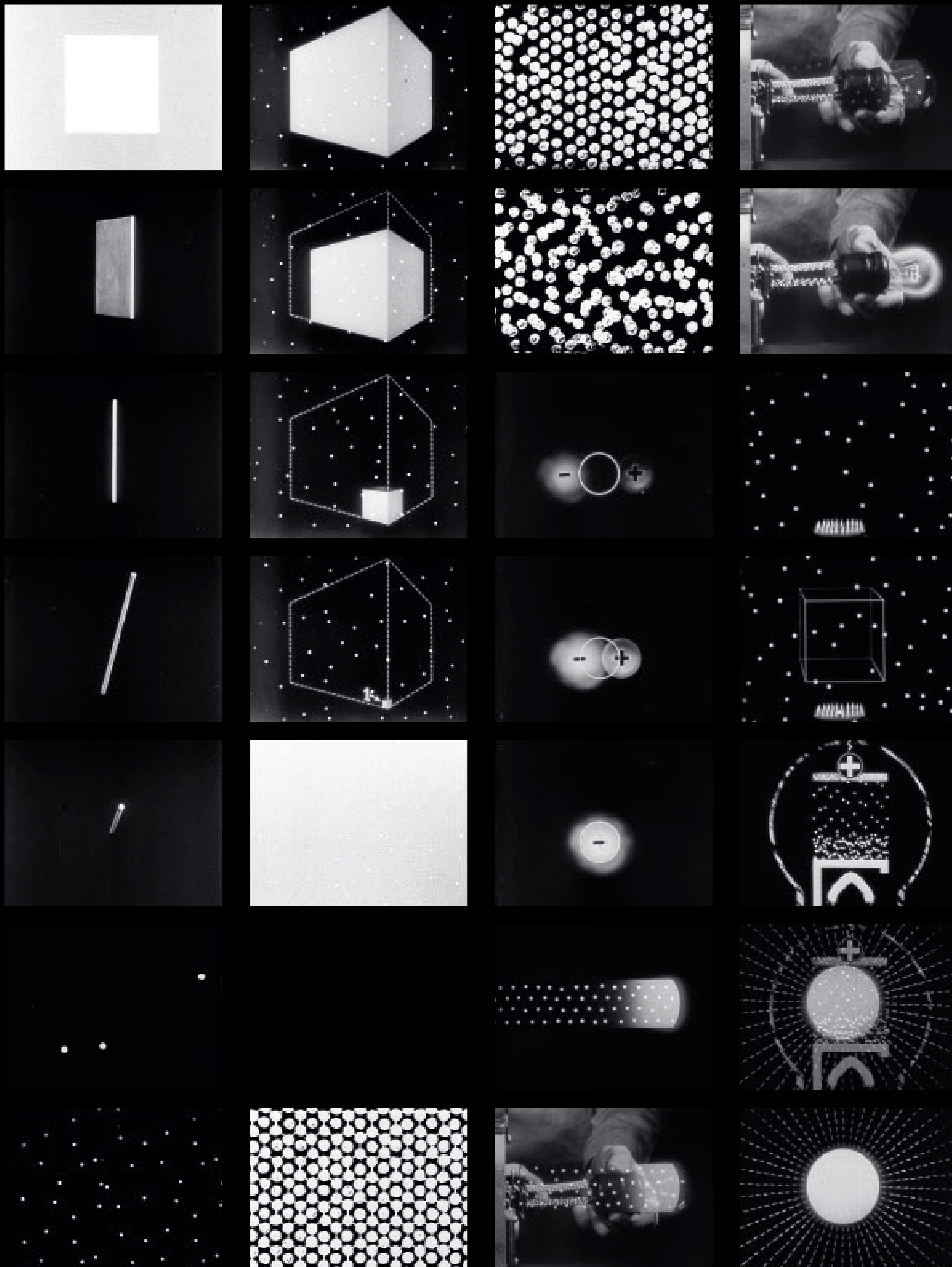
Though Bruce's films weren't seen on TV or cable, they would occasionally be screened in museums or other institutions—in the museum context, appropriation (if the material was transformed in some way) was acceptable and deemed legal, whereas if they were commercially sold, the owners of the original films might have sued. Despite the lack of mainstream distribution and visibility, the future directors and editors of music videos took Bruce's innovations—the jump cuts, flash frames, running stuff backward, found footage, rapid editing—and made them the default grammar of visual music. Eventually these techniques made their way into feature films as well. You could go to music clubs and folks would be projecting old sales films and anything they could get their hands on onto the walls to accompany the live bands. None of it was anywhere near as good as Bruce's films, but that's where the idea came from.

Now we're all used to both the appearance of found footage (and found audio) and the crazy nonlinear cuts and logical leaps that Bruce pioneered. I myself began directing music videos a year or so after this time spent in San Francisco—and the Bruce influence is clear, at least to me. The irrational logic of his montages made perfect sense if one didn't demand that every cut had to have a rational justification. By the mid-1980s I did some scenes in a film that included found footage from food ads—all of which were cleared! I'd done my own version of Bruce, but I'd learned my legal lesson, too.

Despite the influence and legacy of his films, I don't think Bruce thought of himself primarily as a filmmaker. I think he saw himself as a visual artist who sometimes used film as a medium, even though it was the films that drew most of us to his work. I internalized that aspect of what Bruce and others were doing—that art can be more about ideas than skill within a medium, and can be expressed in almost any appropriate medium rather than being necessarily deeply embedded in one specific craft. I hope more people discover Bruce's work through this show and others, and hope they can be as energized and inspired as I was when I first saw it.

OPPOSITE PAGE: 167

MEA CULPA 1981
16mm film, black and white, sound, 5 min.
Courtesy Conner Family Trust

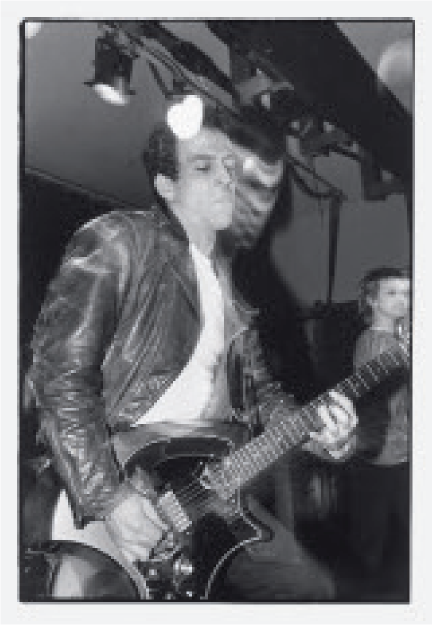




ROZ MAKES A GIANT STEP FOR MANKIND: NEGATIVE TREND January 23, 1978



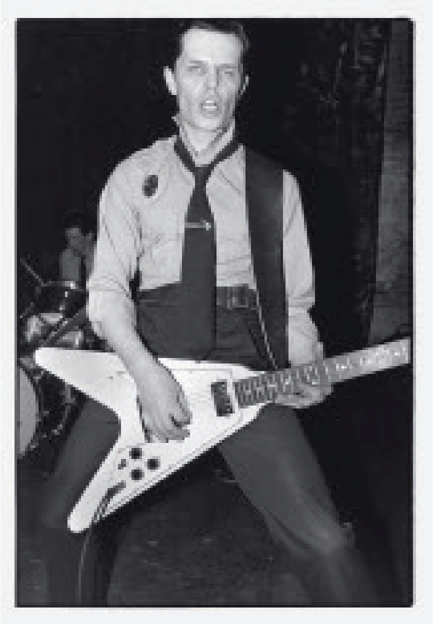
SLEEPERS January 20, 1978



BILLY: UXA January 20, 1978



DE DETROIT: UXA July 10, 1978



FRANKIE FIX: CRIME January 21, 1978



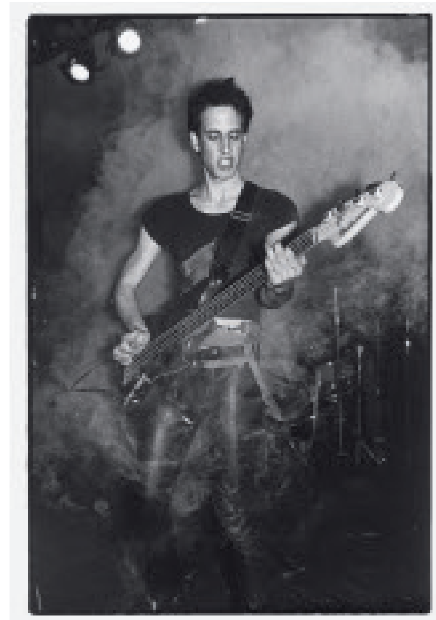
ROZ OF NEGATIVE TREND: SUSPENDED ANIMATION January 3, 1978

168 **26 PUNK PHOTOS** 1978, printed 1985

Twenty-six gelatin silver prints, ed. of 3
Each: 9 ⅞ × 13 ⅛ in. (25.1 cm × 33.3 cm) or 13 ⅛ × 9 ⅞ in. (33.3 × 25.1 cm)
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, museum purchase: bequest of Thérèse Bonney, class of 1916, by exchange



WOMEN'S ROOM AT THE MABUHAY April 3, 1978



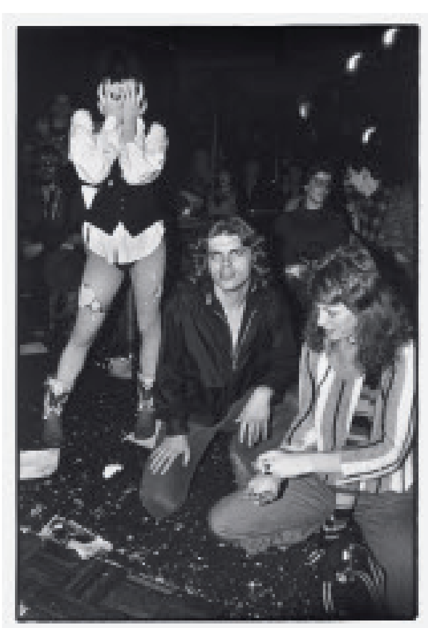
WILL SHATTER: NEGATIVE TREND January 29, 1978



DE DETROIT: UXA July 10, 1978



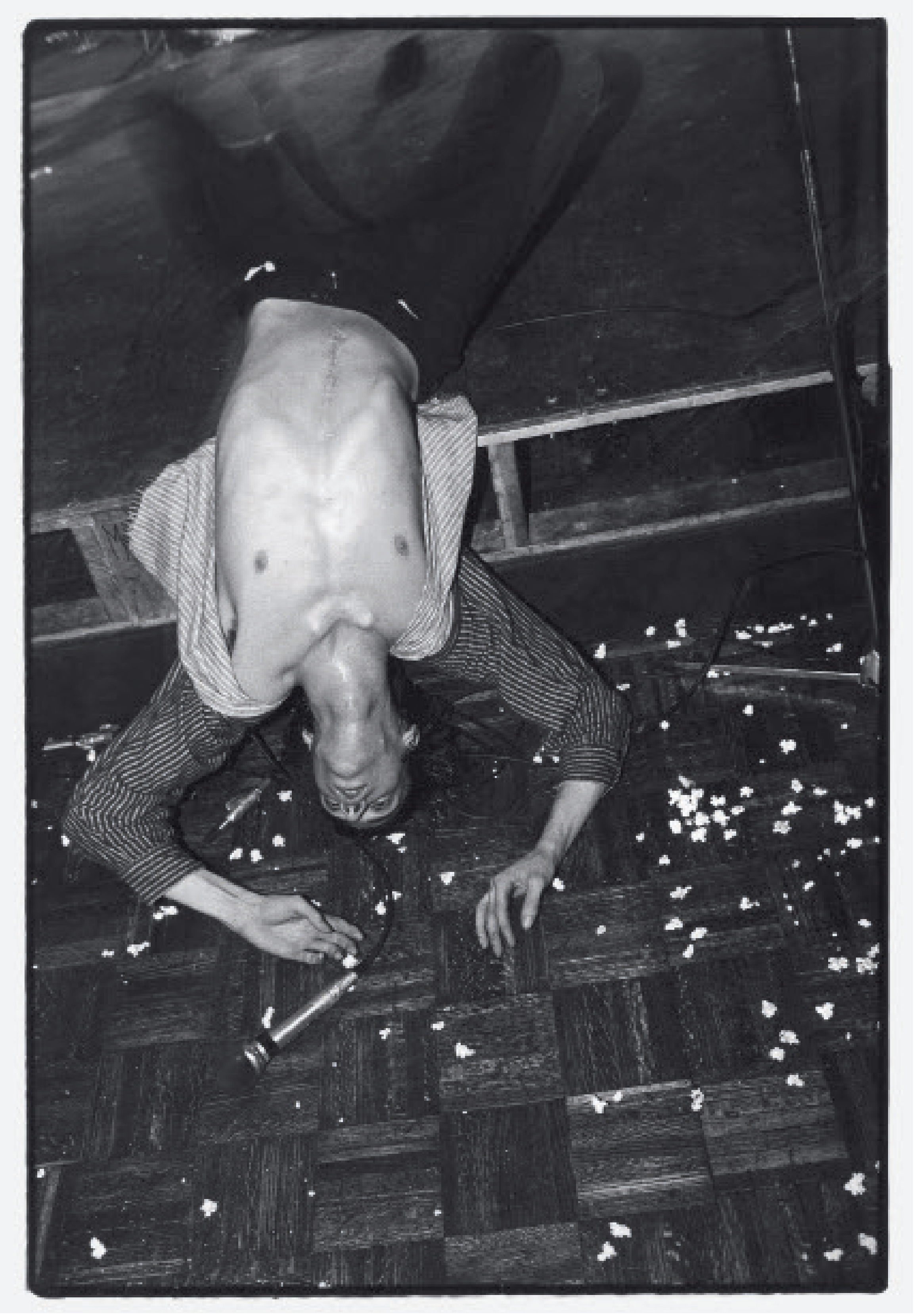
RICKY WILLIAMS AND DE DETROIT July 10, 1978



TRIXIE ANXIOUSLY AWAITS CRIME January 20, 1978



THE MUTANTS March 7, 1978



RICKY WILLIAMS: SLEEPERS January 20, 1978



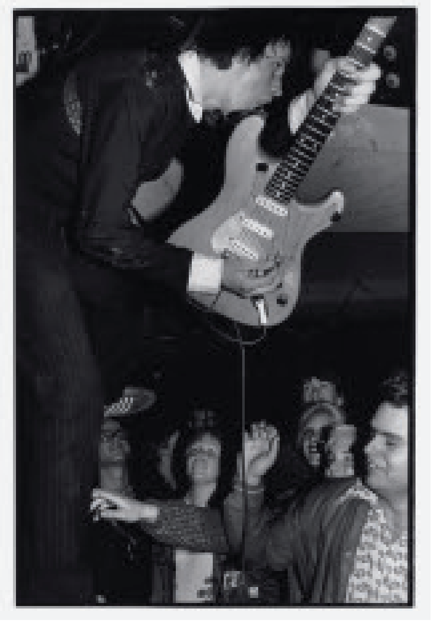
F WORD: AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION May 1978



F WORD June 16, 1978



SLEEPERS January 20, 1978



DIM WANKER: F WORD May 1978



CHERI THE PENGUIN January 28, 1978



NEGATIVE TREND: AUDIENCE OF ONE February 16, 1978

169 **27 PUNK PHOTOS** 1978, printed 2004 Twenty-seven gelatin silver prints, ed. of 3
Dimensions vary; each shown here: 14 × 11 in. (35.6 × 27.9 cm) or 11 × 14 in. (27.9 × 35.6 cm)
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, museum purchase: bequest of Thérèse Bonney, class of 1916, by exchange

SUMMER 1980

Christian Marclay

Our duo was called *The Bachelors, even.* Kurt Henry played the guitar and I sang. We also used prerecorded cassettes, skipping records, small percussion, Super-8 film loops, slides, and props. In the summer of 1980, we had just graduated from the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston and took the Greyhound bus cross-country to San Francisco. We had lined up a series of gigs in clubs where the local punk scene was blossoming.

We played at the Mabuhay Gardens, Club Generic, Savoy Tivoli, and a couple of nights at Club Foot in a then gritty industrial zone called Dogpatch. The first night we performed there, a gangly guy was dancing wildly in front of the stage. We were surprised, because our music was far from dance music. It turned out he was Bruce Conner. The next day we had lunch with him, and he suggested we play our music while he would show some of his collection of found footage on multiple projectors. We decided for the occasion only to mix records on multiple turntables.

The decision to collaborate was spontaneous, like many things that happened at Club Foot. The club was more like a cabaret, open to performance, poetry, film, art, and music. The press was not paying attention; it was all through word of mouth or cheap Xeroxed flyers and posters. People came to Club Foot because they were sure to encounter the unexpected.

JC Garrett (who was a cofounder of Club Foot with Richard Kelly, Cindy Buff, and Richard Edson) had a day job working for an AV company and had access to 16mm projectors. We can't seem to agree exactly on how many projectors were used, but I remember at least eight; Garrett remembers only four. Bruce was delighted. He brought over what he called his "home movies," which were a collection of found educational films, industrial films, newsreels, cartoons, etc. Garrett remembers how excited Bruce was over having just acquired a copy of Disney's 1959 *The Shaggy Dog.* He had reedited it for the occasion. Some of the projectors were set up with makeshift loops using wire coat hangers. These Kodak and Bell & Howell projectors were heavy-duty reel-to-reel machines that were the equivalent of our sturdy industrial Califone turntables. He was mixing films, we were mixing records.

An underrecognized period in Bruce's career was between 1966 and 1967, when he collaborated on light shows for concerts at the Avalon Ballroom in San Francisco. He used rows of slide projectors with hand-painted slides and experimented with liquid projections, films, and psychedelic drugs. Finding the dark cinema experience limiting, Bruce enjoyed the participatory and immersive quality of these events, as live music and colored lights came together in an experiential whole, a kind of "expanded cinema." And I'm sure his decision to use multiple projectors on that night at Club Foot was a way to relive those early experiments (minus the hallucinogenic drugs).

Bruce and I stayed in touch. I would occasionally send him a card or a new recording. When in 1985 I sent him my first LP, *Record Without a Cover,* he was encouraging: "Everyone is delighted with it. Keep in the groove." His replies were witty, typewritten notes. They were signed Bruce Conner, Bruce, or BC. In one dated September 8, 2000, he explained why he had become an anonymous artist and ended the letter with "signed in invisible ink." Contrary to the myth of Bruce being irascible and difficult, he was very sweet and very supportive of what I was doing. In 2004, after I sent him a CD of my djTRIO, he responded, "It makes my computer sound better."

I had seen A MOVIE (1958, pl. 9) when I was a student in Boston in the late 1970s, and the magical flow of one found clip into the next had a lasting influence on me. I identified with his working method: he used old discarded film reels, I used abandoned vinyl discs. We both worked with pop culture detritus, everyday trash. Bruce was an expert at syncing music with moving images. His editing became visual rhythm, the cut was the beat.

After a screening of Bruce's films at the Collective for Living Cinema in New York, I chatted with him on White Street. I was very excited about having just seen his proto–"music video" AMERICA IS WAITING (1981, pl. 166), edited to the music of David Byrne and Brian Eno. Twenty years earlier he had been the first to edit found footage to pop music. Unlike traditional montage, where the sound is added later, Bruce meticulously spliced the image to an existing song. He pioneered this method in 1961 with COSMIC RAY. By the mid-1980s Bruce was influencing a whole new generation making music videos for MTV, and along with hip-hop DJs, he helped popularize the idea of sampling and mixing. VJs were suddenly appearing everywhere.

When I showed my *Video Quartet* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2002, I invited Bruce to the opening, and was happy to see him show up in his Stetson. But when he entered the dark room installation, the four projectors mysteriously went out of sync and stopped. It had never happened before and has never since. It was uncanny, as if he had special powers. Unfortunately, after the projectors were reset Bruce did not go back in. I was of course very disappointed, but also relieved, as I didn't want him to think I was trying to upstage him on his own turf.

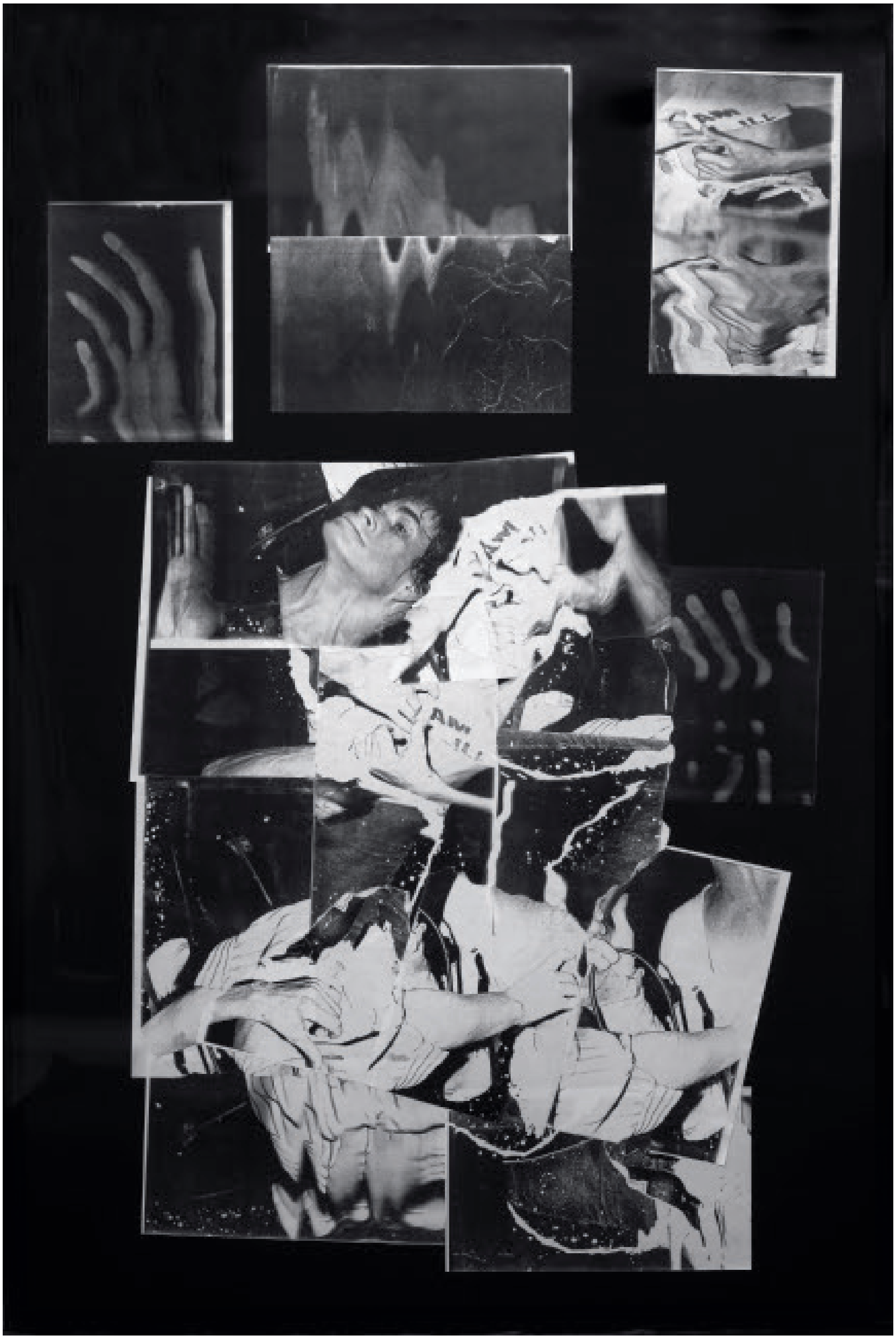
I last saw Bruce on April 30, 2008, when he was sick at home. We sat down at the kitchen table and drank Coca-Cola from Mexico. He liked it because it was more caffeinated and used cane sugar instead of corn syrup. He then showed me a collage he was working on and said it was his last one. Over the years he had called many works his last, had even faked his death, and in 2000 had declared his retirement, but this time it wasn't one of his tricks. It was the real thing. It was his last work and he was determined to cut and paste until the end.



170 **ACE BANDAGE WRAPPED BRICK** 1979
Brick wrapped in Ace bandage
4 ⅛ × 2 ⅛ × 8 ¼ in. (10.5 × 5.4 × 20.1 cm)
Courtesy Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles



171 **FRANKIE FIX DEAD PUNK: 8/1/96; MARK D'AGOSTINO** 1996 Photocopies, magazine pages, acrylic paint, tempera paint, plastic, adhesive tape, Scrabble-letter tiles, filmstrip, string, thread, cord, tacks, pushpins, nails, metal handle, and luggage tag with paper memorial-service program on wood
48 × 40 in. (121.9 × 101.6 cm)
Private collection, Switzerland, courtesy Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles

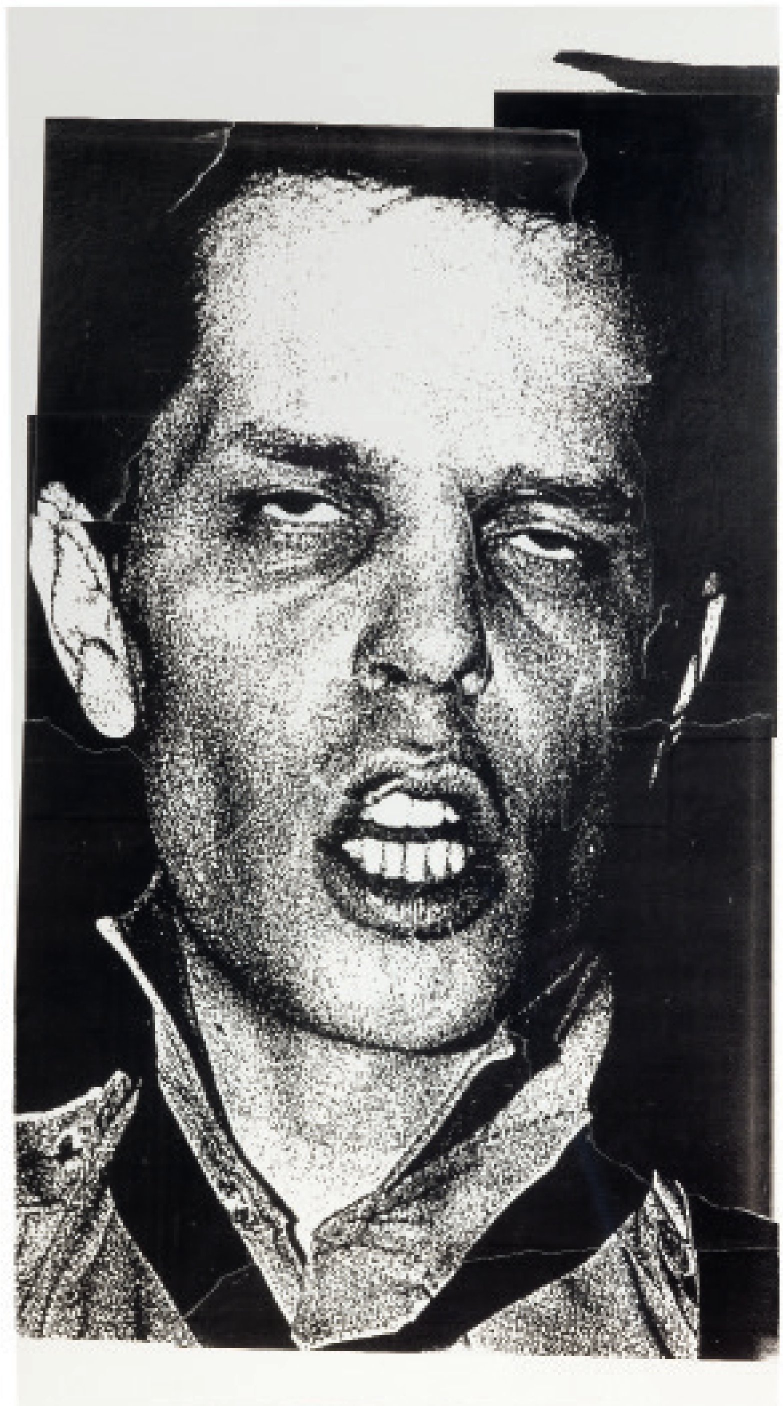


172 **ILL** June 1987 Collage of photocopies on board
58 × 39¼ in. (147.3 × 99.7 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust and Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco



173 **RICKY WILLIAMS DEAD PUNK: NOVEMBER 21, 1992** 1997

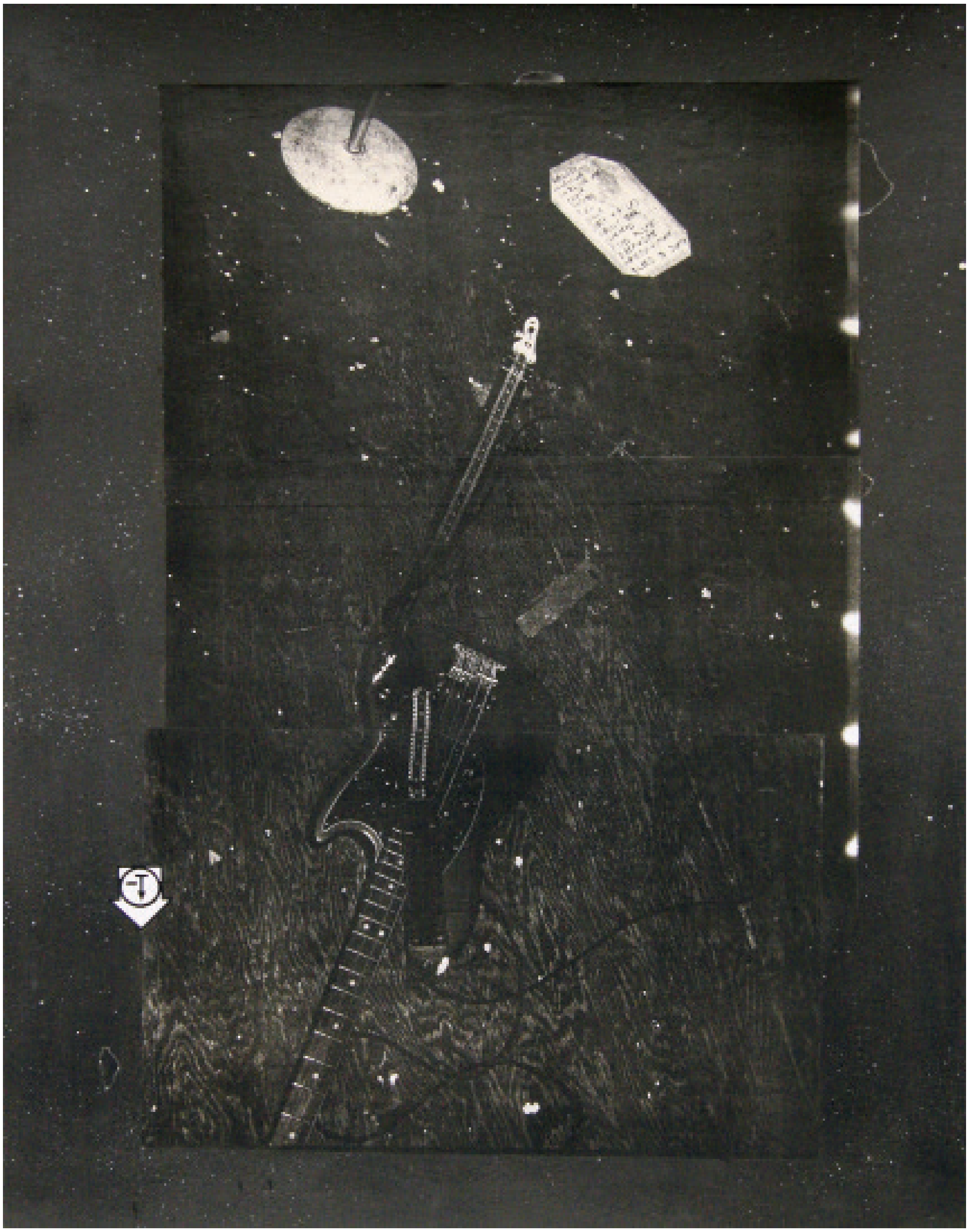
Photocopies, gelatin silver print, plastic, tacks, staples, gauze bandages, tape, hospital bracelet, and medical tubing on board
41 ½ × 16 ½ in. (105.4 × 41.9 cm)
Private collection, France



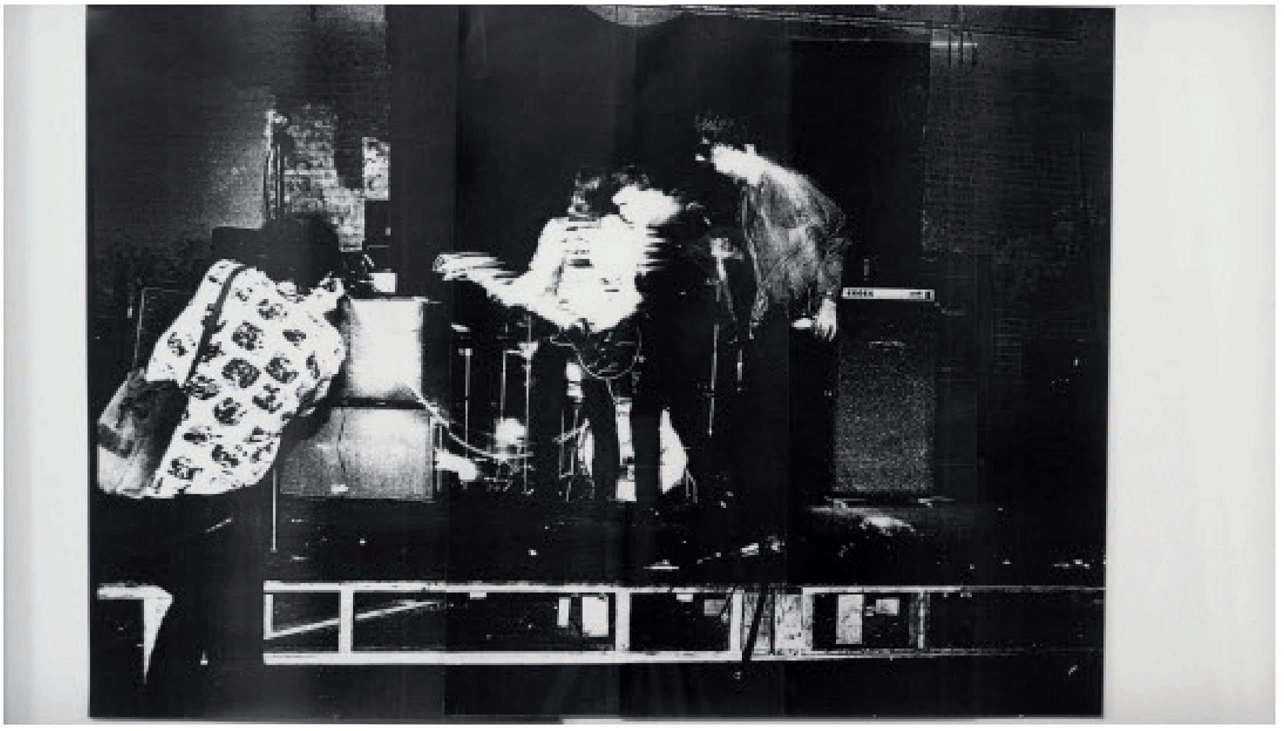
174 **FRANKIE FIX** 1997 Collage of photocopies on board
30 ¼ × 16 ⅜ in. (76.8 × 41.6 cm)
Collection of Martin M. Hale Jr.

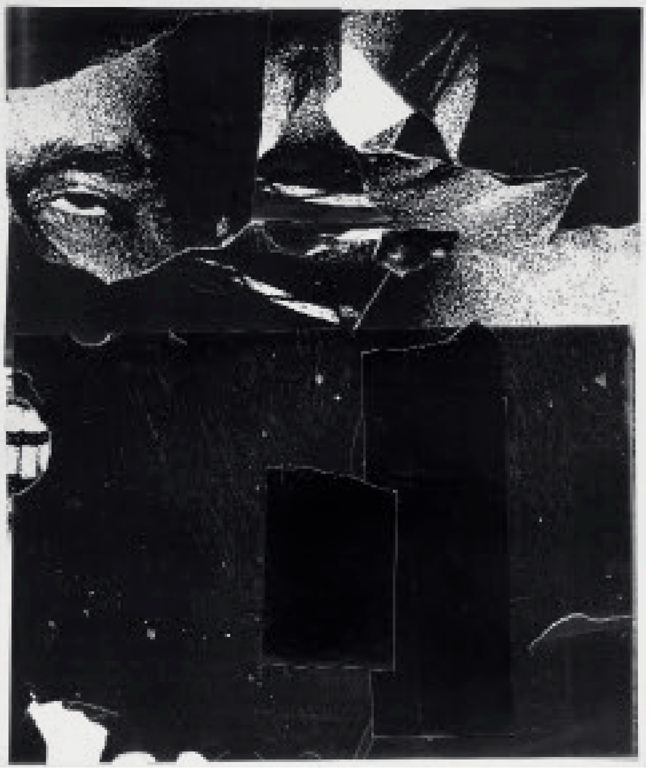


175 **X CRIME** September 10, 1997 Photocopies, rag board, and tacks on plywood
32 × 19 3/16 in. (81.3 × 48.7 cm)
Collection of Sean and Jasmine Sassounian, Los Angeles



176 **WILL SHATTER'S GUITAR THROWN DOWN** June 21, 1997 Collage of photocopies on board
30 × 22 ¾ in. (76.2 × 57.8 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust and Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco





177 **SLEEPERS** June 23, 1997 Collage of photocopies on board
17 1/4 × 30 in. (43.8 × 76.2 cm)
Private collection, France

178 **FRANKIE FIX** June 30, 1997 Collage of photocopies on board
19 5/16 × 16 1/8 in. (49.1 × 41 cm)
Balkanski Family Collection



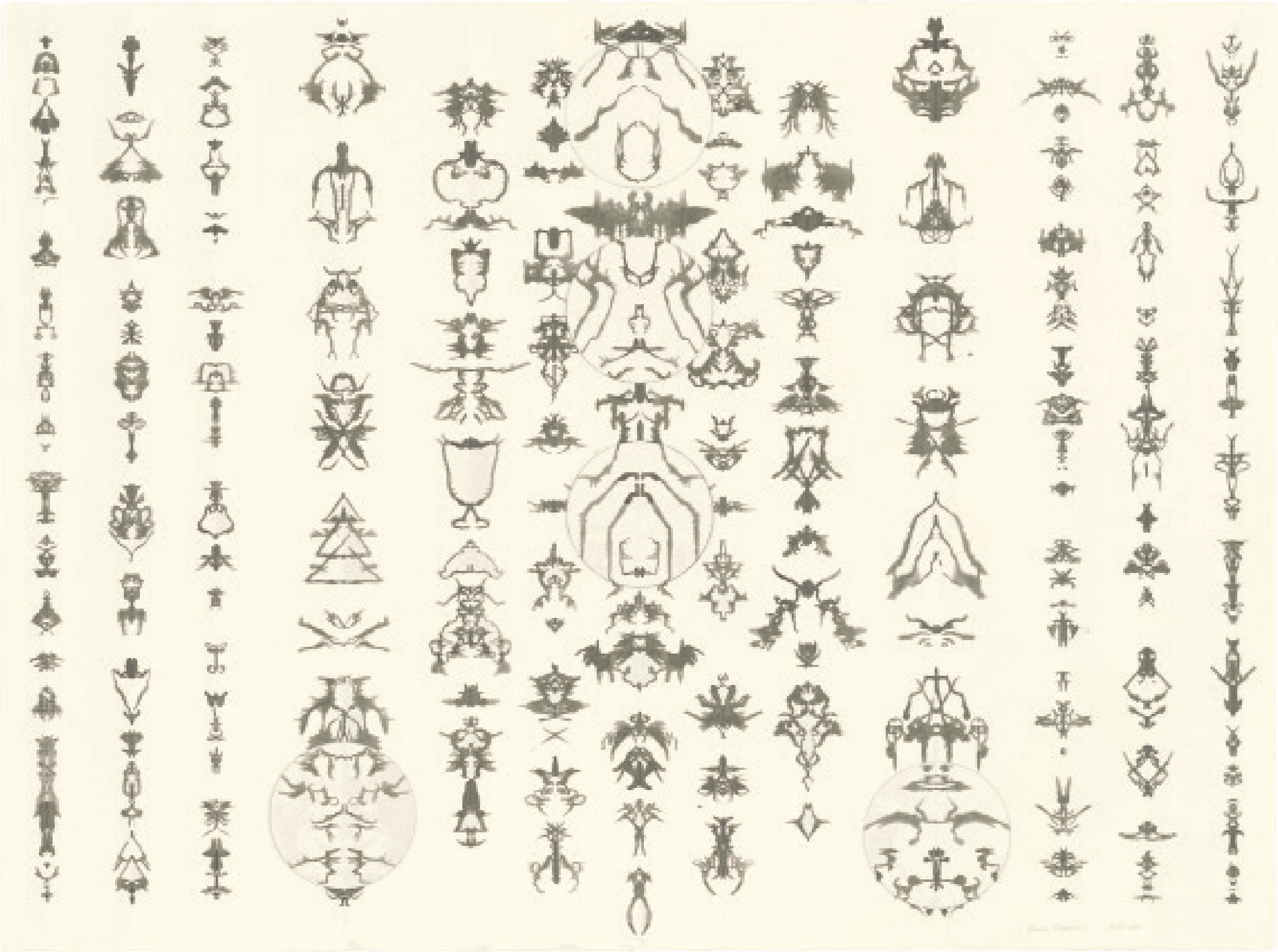
179 **BOMBHEAD** 1989 Collage of found illustration and photocopy
9 ¾ × 7 ¹¹⁄₁₆ in. (24.8 × 19.5 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust



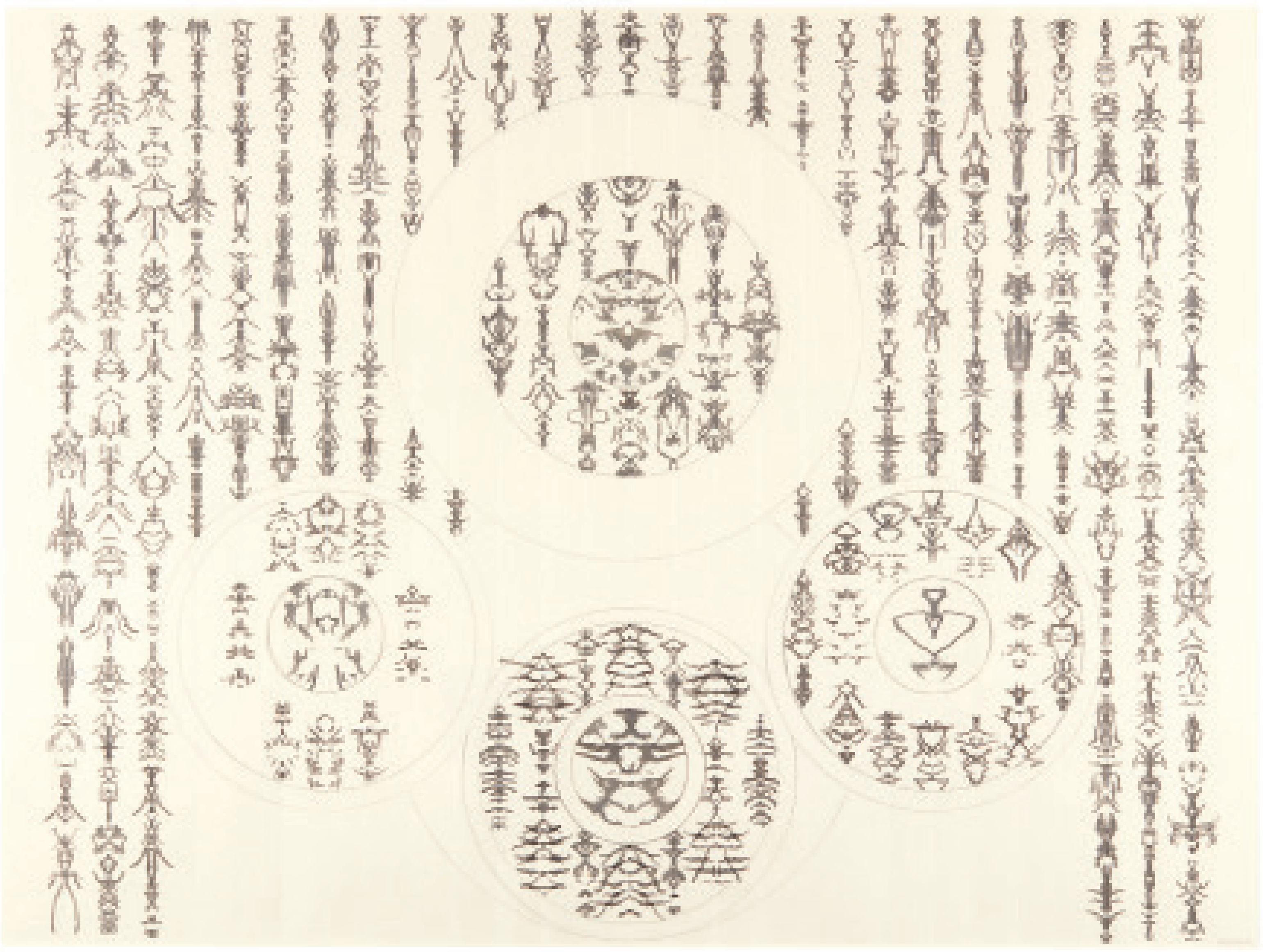
180 **BALLET** November 12, 1981 Ink on paper
22 × 29⅞ in. (55.9 × 75.9 cm)
Collection of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson



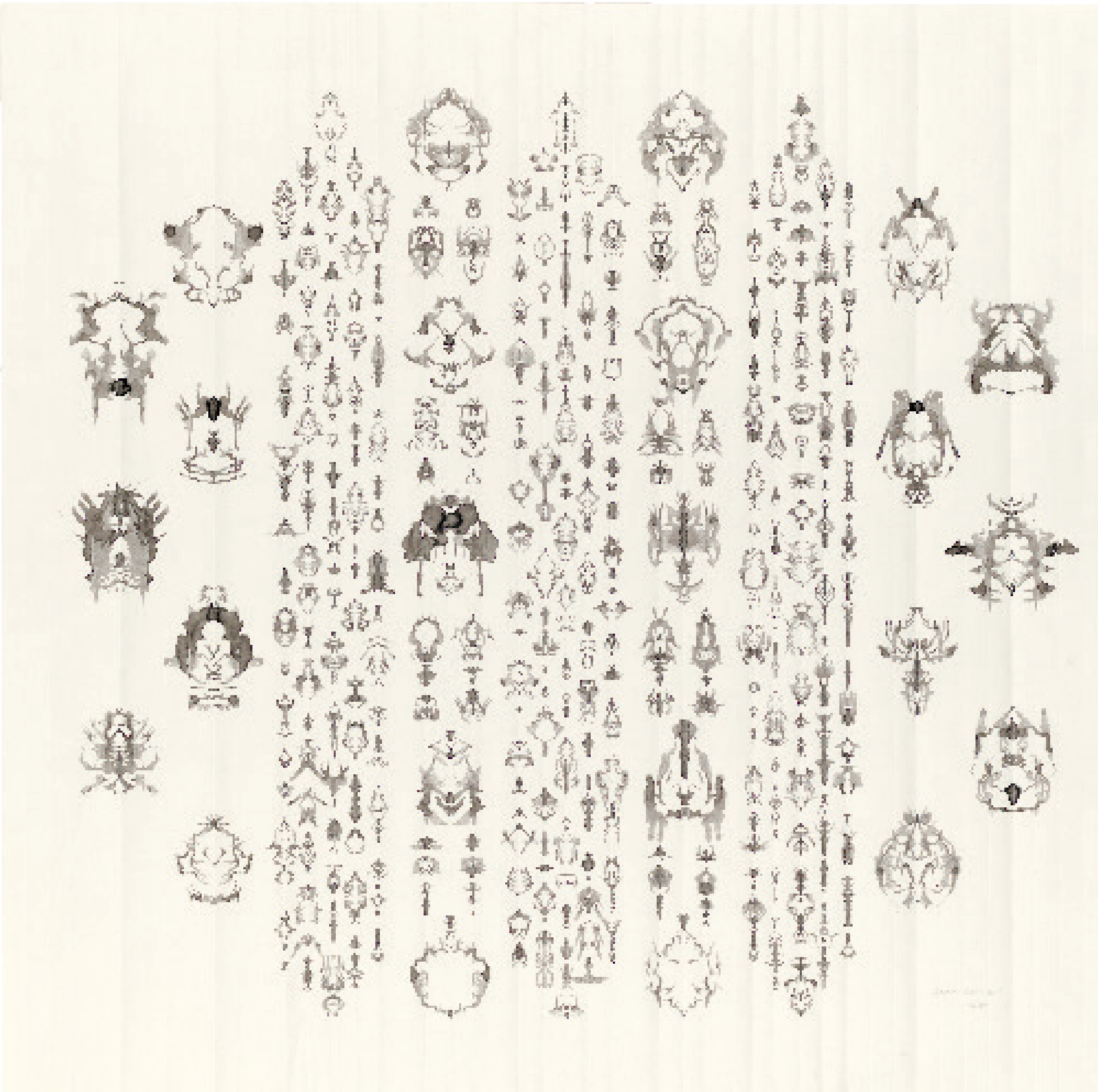
181 **UNTITLED** February 13, 1987 Ink on paper
9 ⅜ × 8 ¼ in. (23.8 × 21 cm)
Collection of Olivier Berggruen



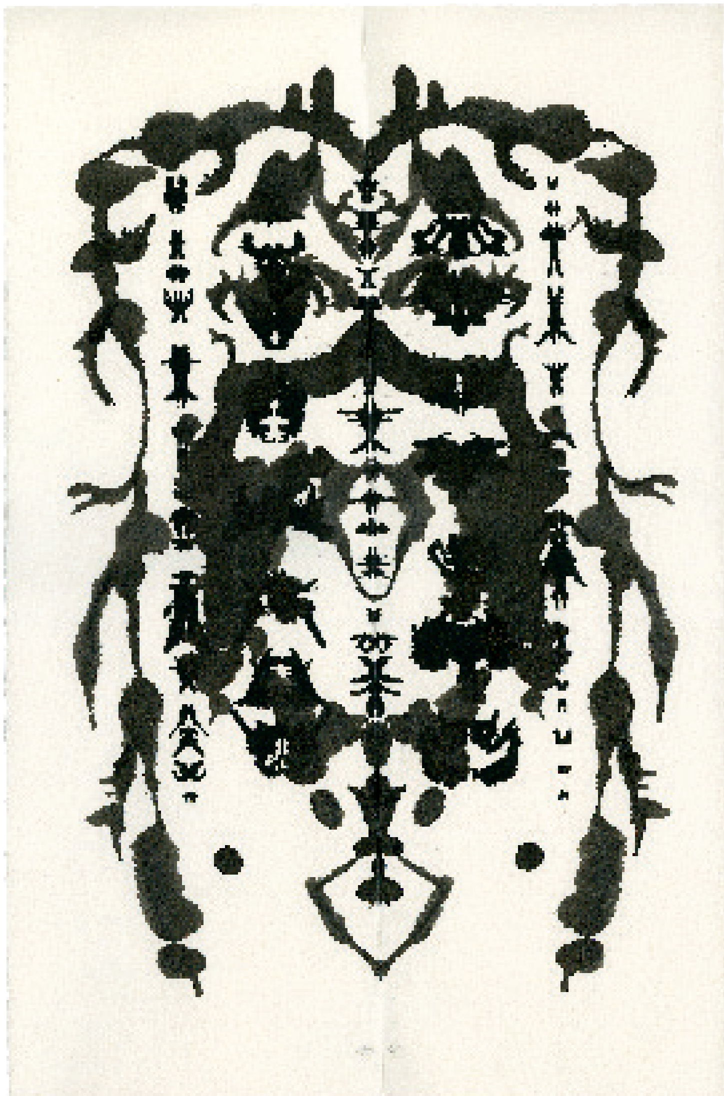
182 **INKBLOT DRAWING** August 7, 1990 Ink on paper
22 ¼ × 30 ⅛ in. (56.5 × 76.5 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, purchased with funds given by Sally and Wynn Kramarsky



183 **INKBLOT DRAWING** September 12, 1990 Ink on paper
22½ × 29½ in. (57.2 × 74.9 cm)
Balkanski Family Collection



184 **INKBLOT DRAWING** November 11, 1990 Ink on paper
24 15/16 × 23 3/8 in. (63.3 × 59.4 cm)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase, with funds from the Wilfred P. and Rose J. Cohen Purchase Fund and the Richard and Dorothy Rodgers Purchase Fund



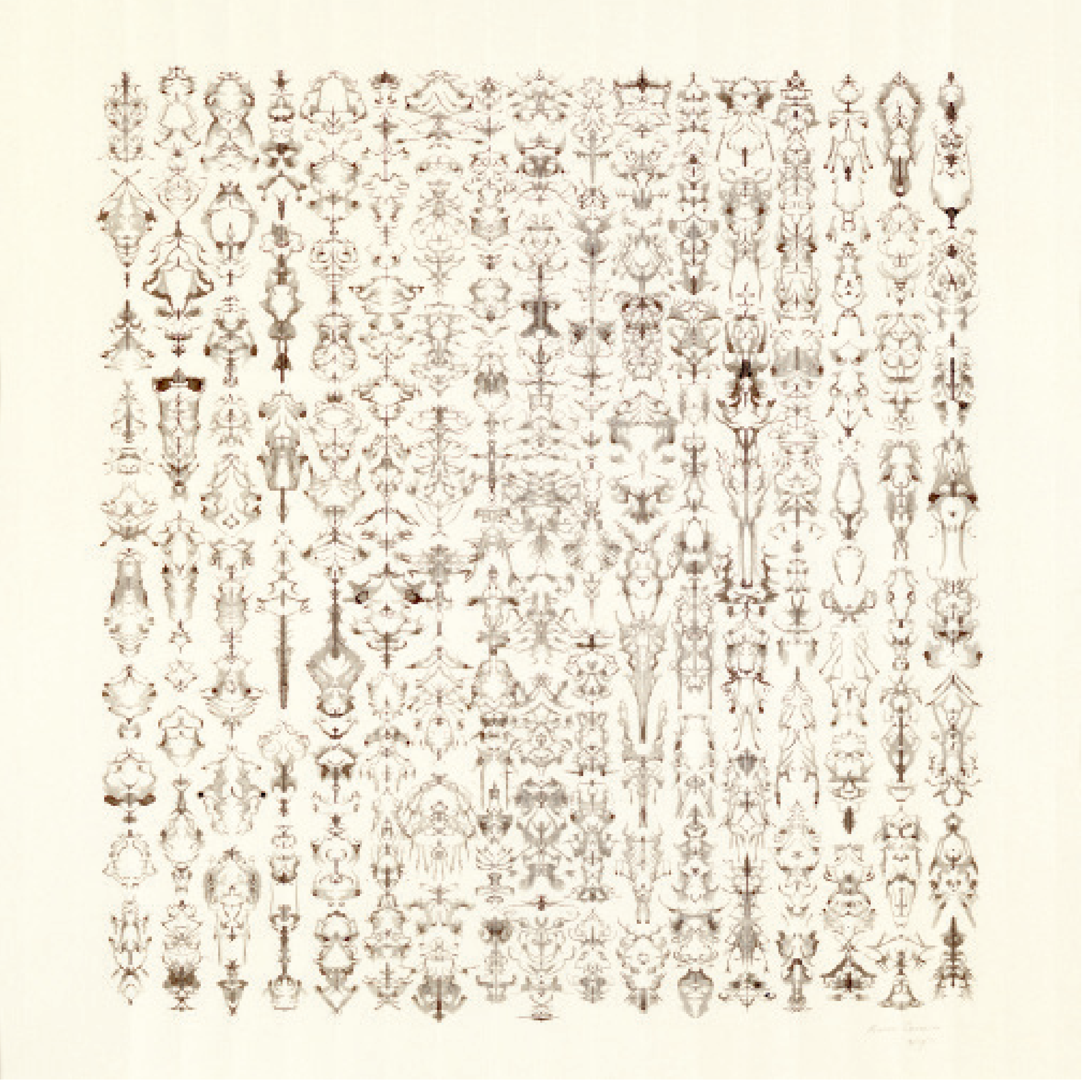


185 **DRAWING FOR ADVENTURES PORTFOLIO** 1991

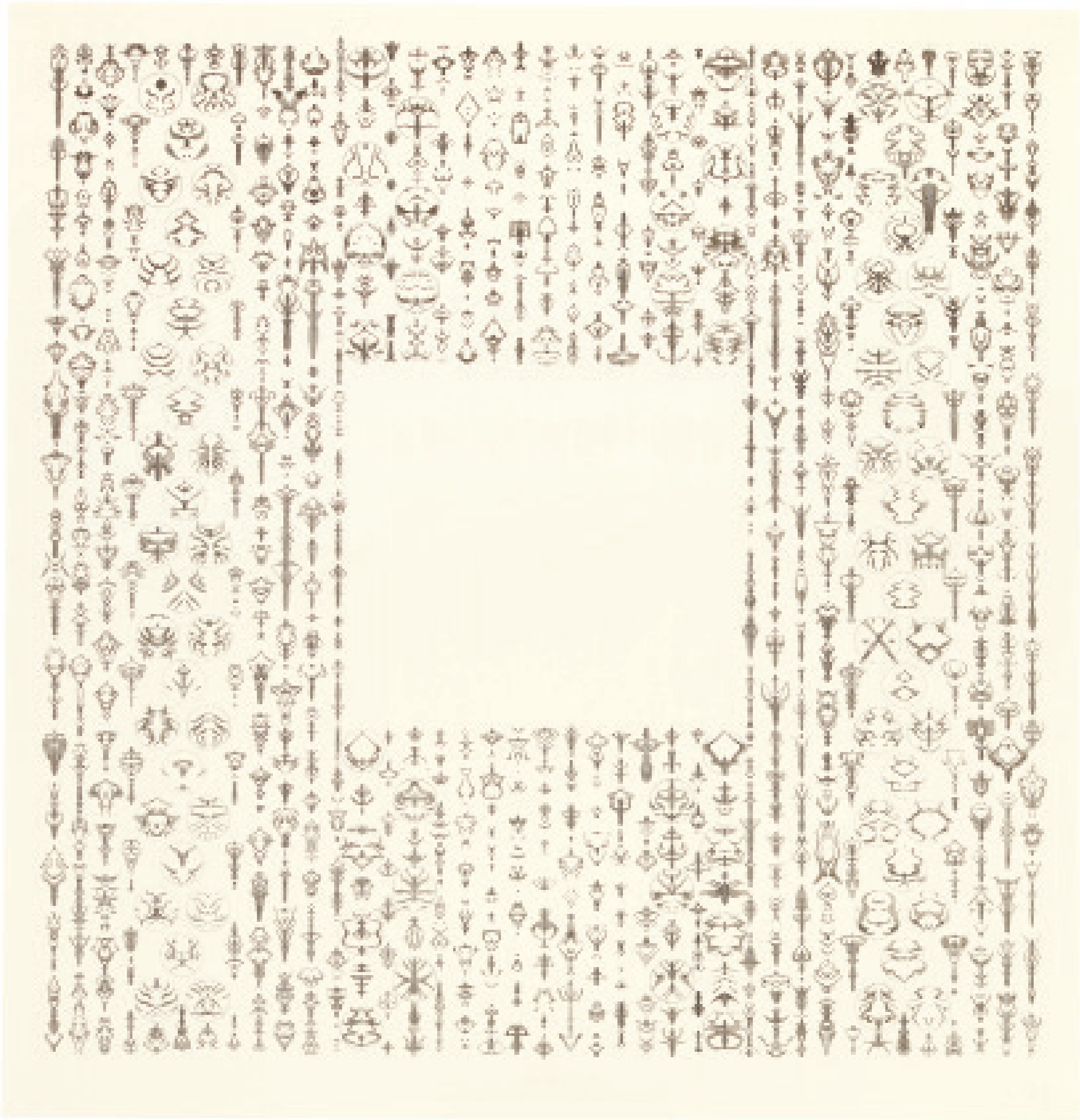
Monoprint
12 3/8 × 8 3/16 in. (31.4 × 20.8 cm)
Courtesy Senior & Shopmaker Gallery, New York

186 **The Adventures of a Novel in Four Chapters** 1991

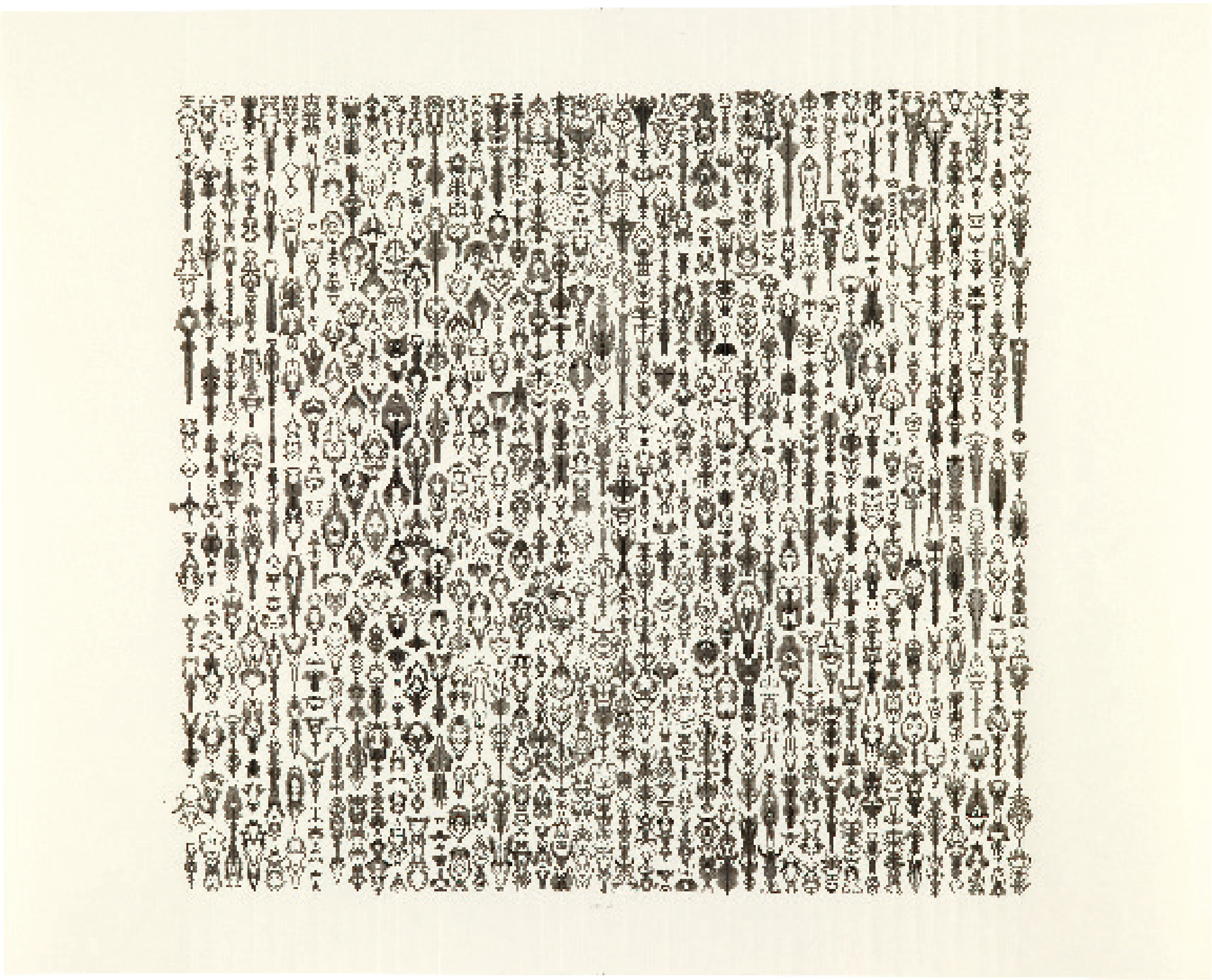
Bruce Conner and Michael McClure
Illustrated book with fourteen relief prints and one ink drawing, ed. of 100
Page (each, approx.): 13 3/8 × 10 7/16 in. (34 × 26.5 cm); closed: 13 3/4 × 10 11/16 × 9/16 in. (35 × 27.1 × 1.5 cm)
Published by Hine Editions/Limestone Press
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, John B. Turner Fund



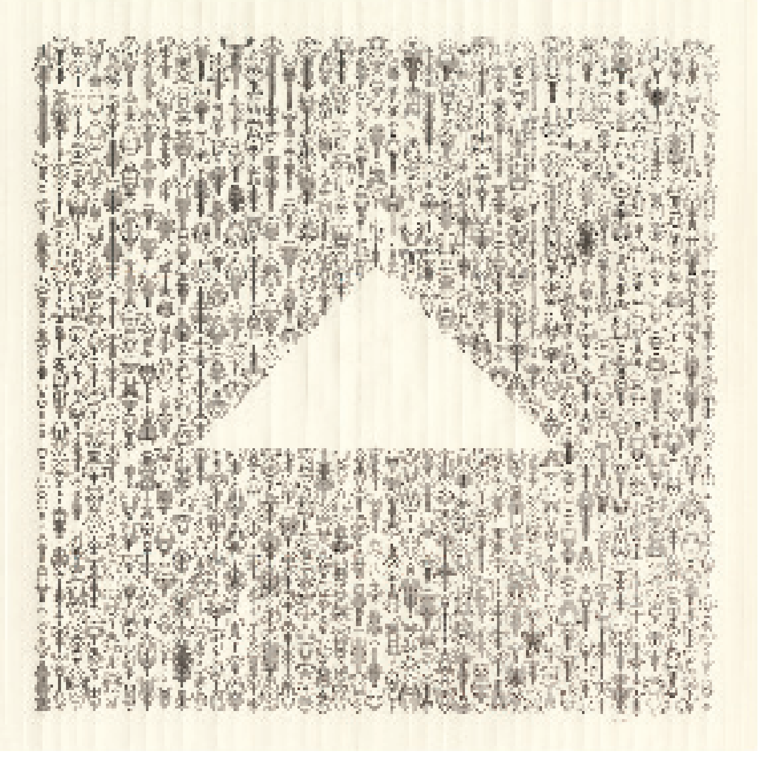
187 **SAMPLER** February 20, 1991 Ink on paper
22 × 21 ⅞ in. (55.9 × 55.6 cm)
UBS Art Collection

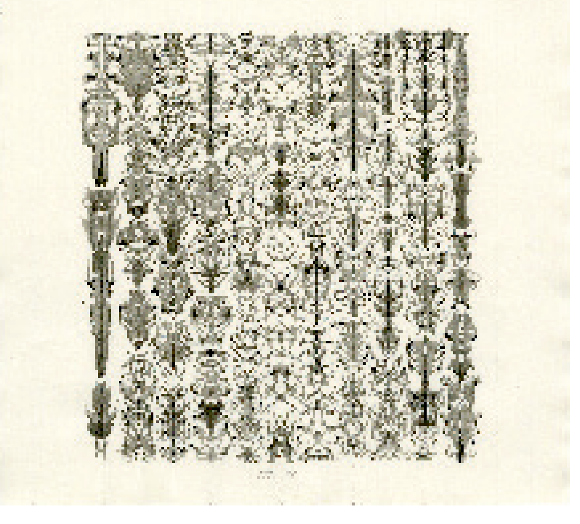


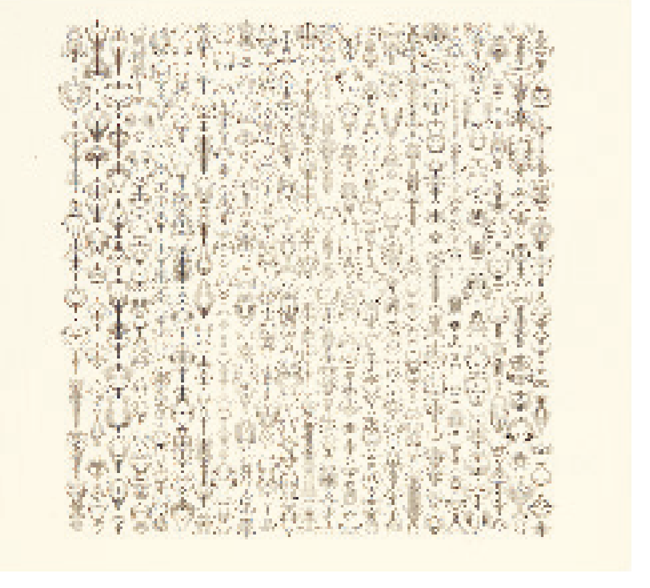
188 **UNTITLED** April 18, 1992 Ink on paper
23 × 25 7/8 in. (58.4 × 65.7 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust



189 **DOG BARKING/RABBIT HIDING** October 1, 1991 Ink on paper
23¼ × 29 in. (59.1 × 73.7 cm)
Saint Louis Art Museum, Friends Fund 35:1992



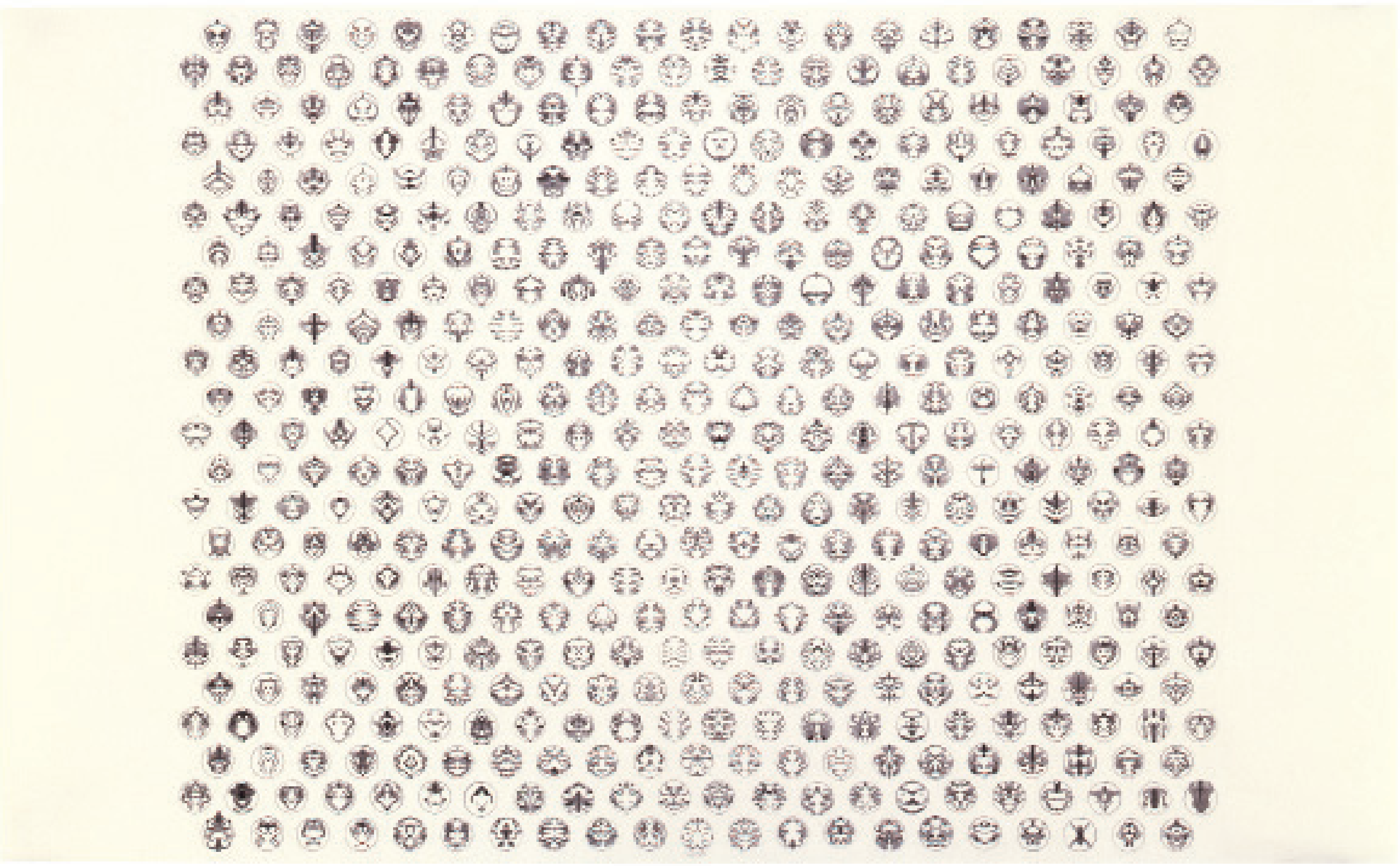




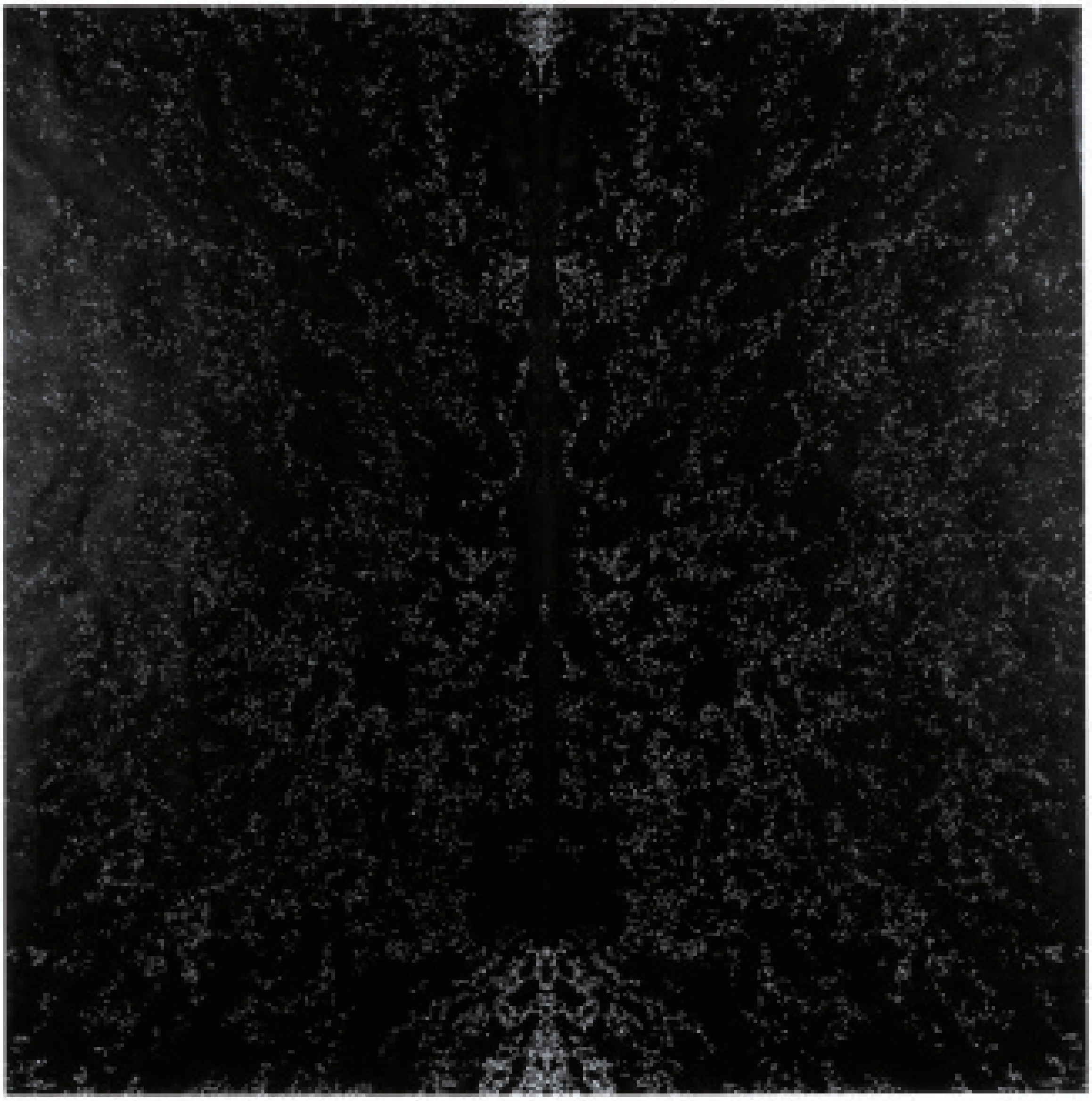
190 **INKBLOT DRAWING** December 19, 1991
Ink on paper
21½ × 21½ in. (54.6 × 54.6 cm)
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, museum purchase: bequest of Phoebe Apperson Hearst, by exchange

191 **INKBLOT DRAWING** December 23, 1991
Ink on paper
6 1/16 × 5 9/16 in. (15.4 × 14.1 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust

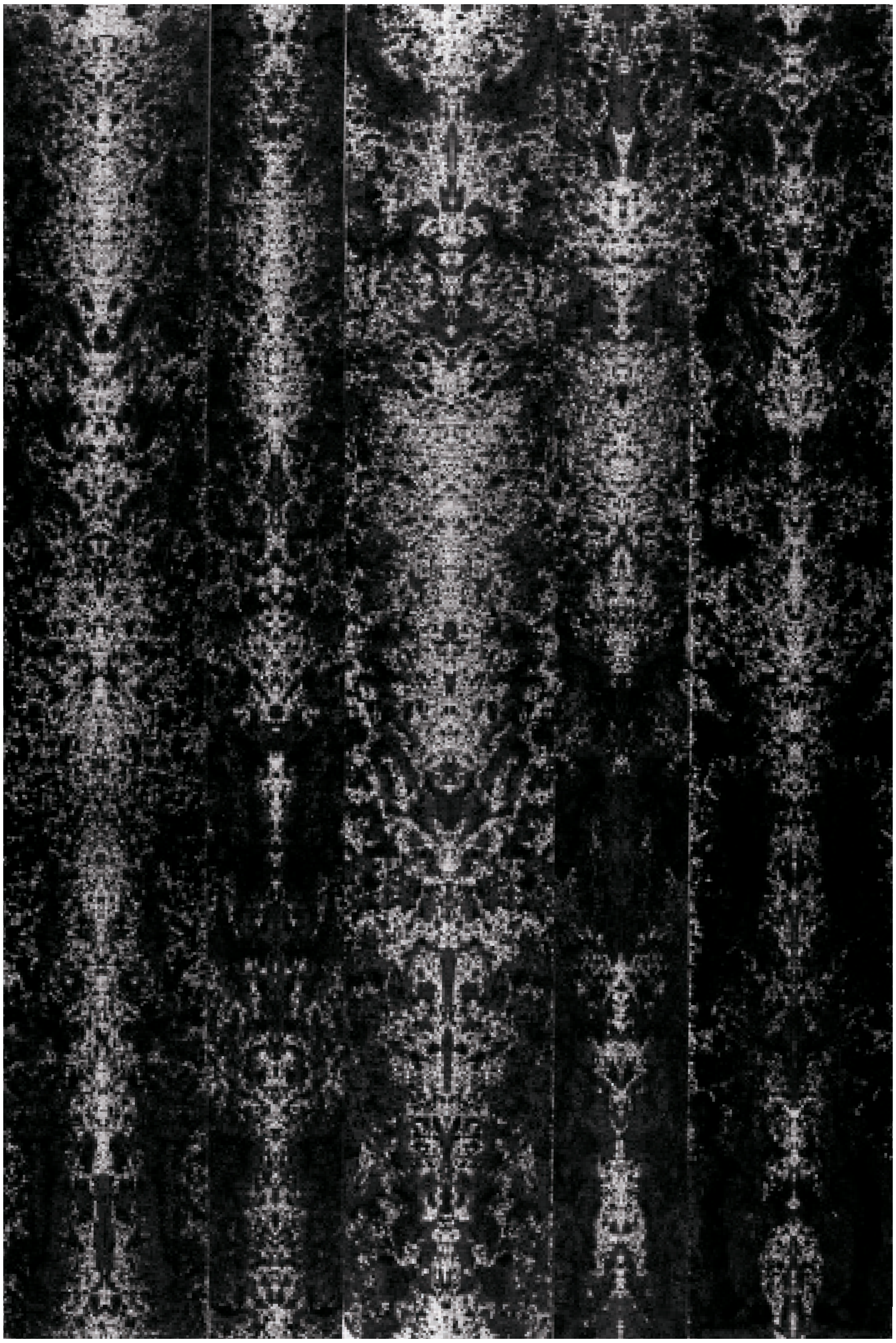
192 **UNTITLED** December 16, 1991
Ink on paper
12⅛ × 11⅝ in. (30.8 × 29.5 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust



193 **494 INKBLOTS** November 20, 1992 Ink on paper
17 11/16 × 28 15/16 in. (44.9 × 73.5 cm)
Collection of Jeff Leifer



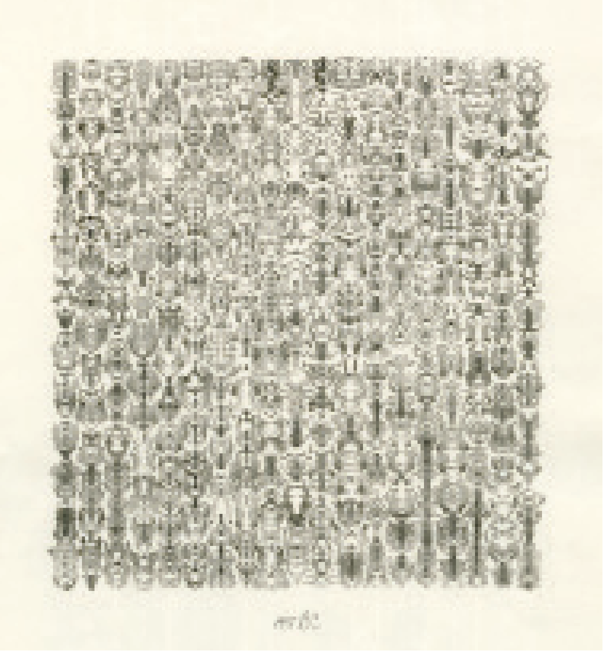
194 **UNTITLED** January 17, 1993 Ink on paper
23 × 22 7/8 in. (58.4 × 58.1 cm)
Collection of Susan Inglett

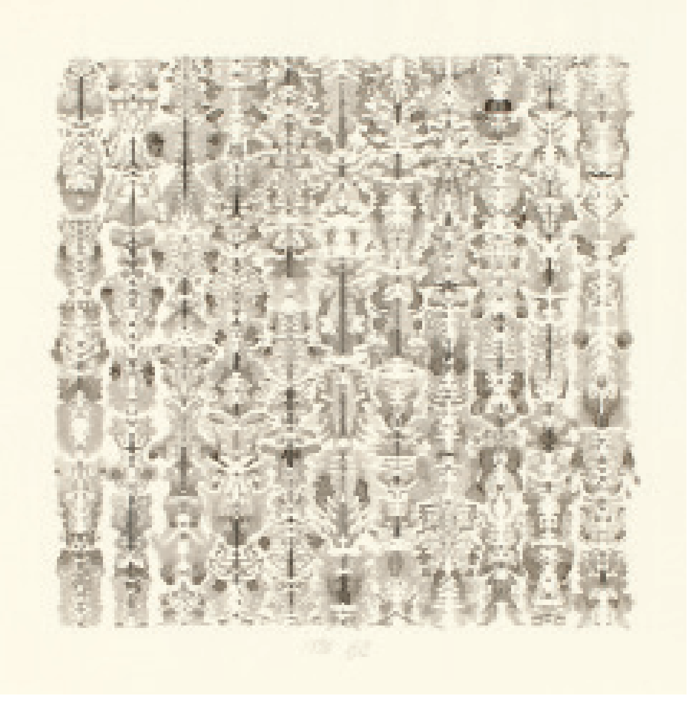


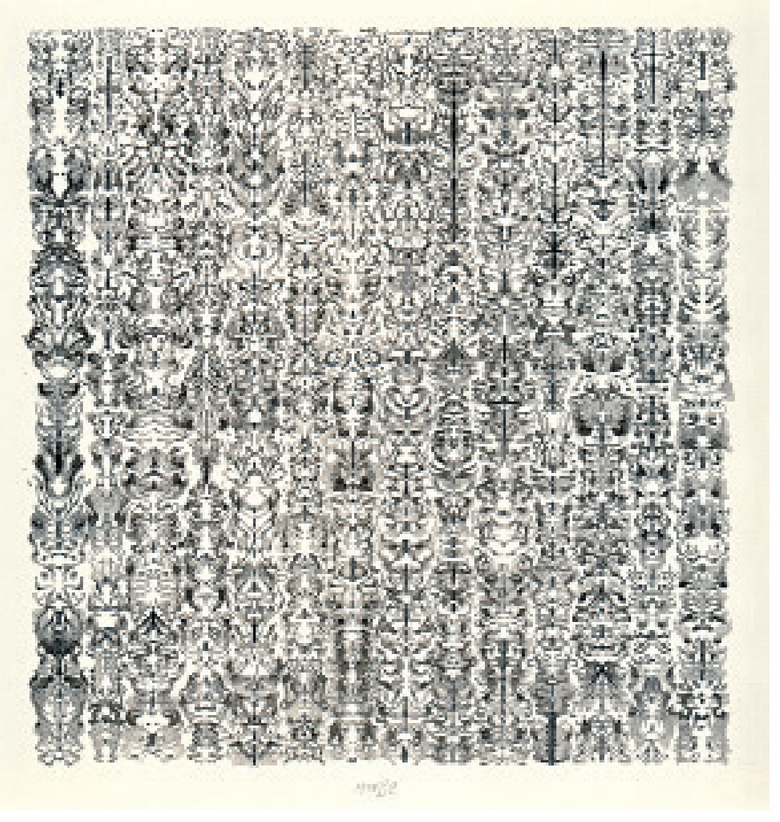
195 **INKBLOT DRAWING** January 31, 1993 Ink on paper mounted on board
23 × 15½ in. (58.4 × 39.3 cm)
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Joan Palevsky



196 **UNTITLED** March 27, 1993 Ink on paper with photocopies on mat board
29½ × 22⅛ in. (74.9 × 56.2 cm)
Collection of Robert Harshorn Shimshak and Marion Brenner



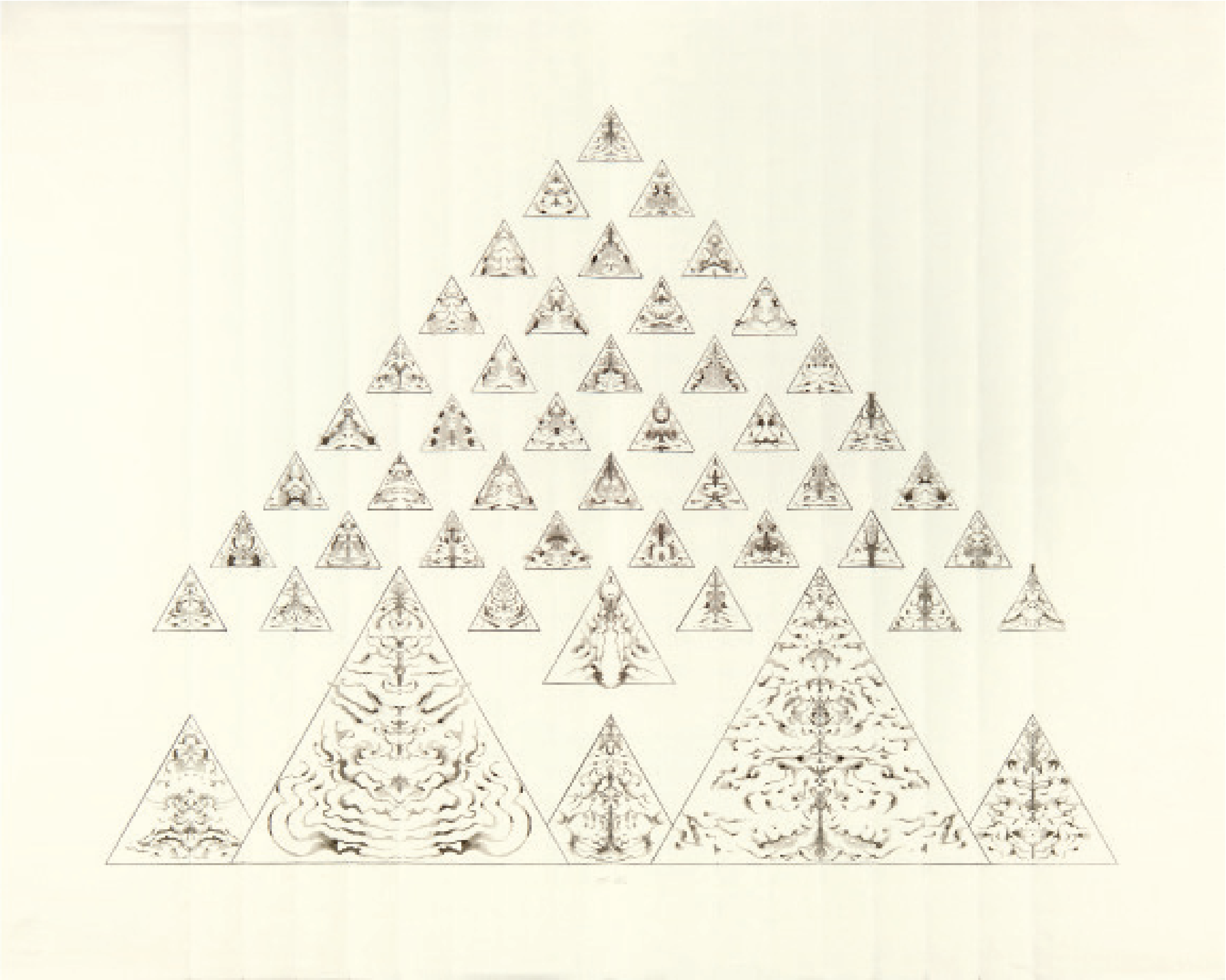




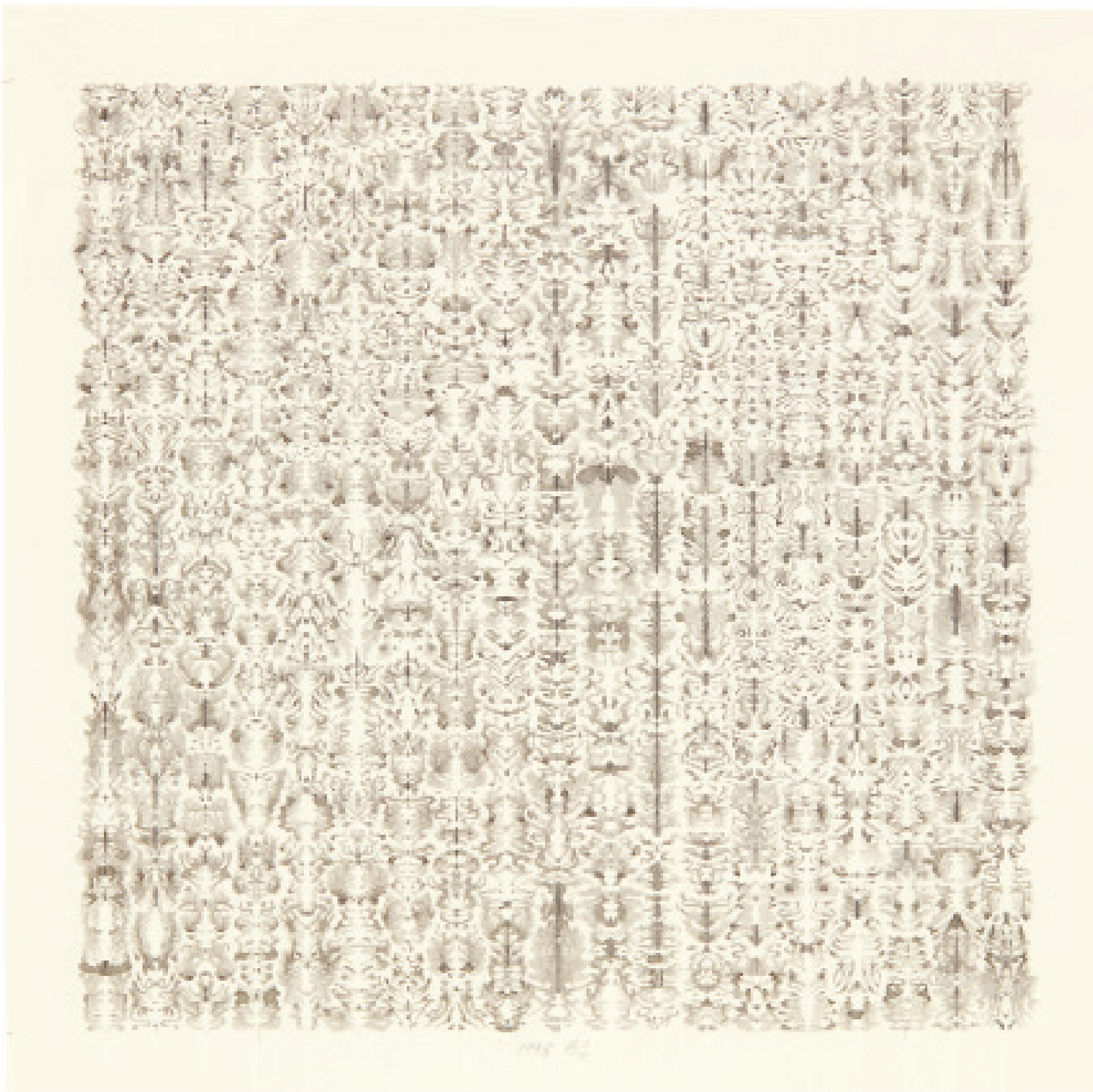
197 **INKBLOT DRAWING** January 2, 1995 Ink on paper
5 3/16 × 4 13/16 in. (13.2 × 12.2 cm)
Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

198 **INKBLOT DRAWING** April 5, 1995 Ink on paper
7 1/2 × 7 1/8 in. (19.1 × 18.1 cm)
The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of the Conner Family Trust

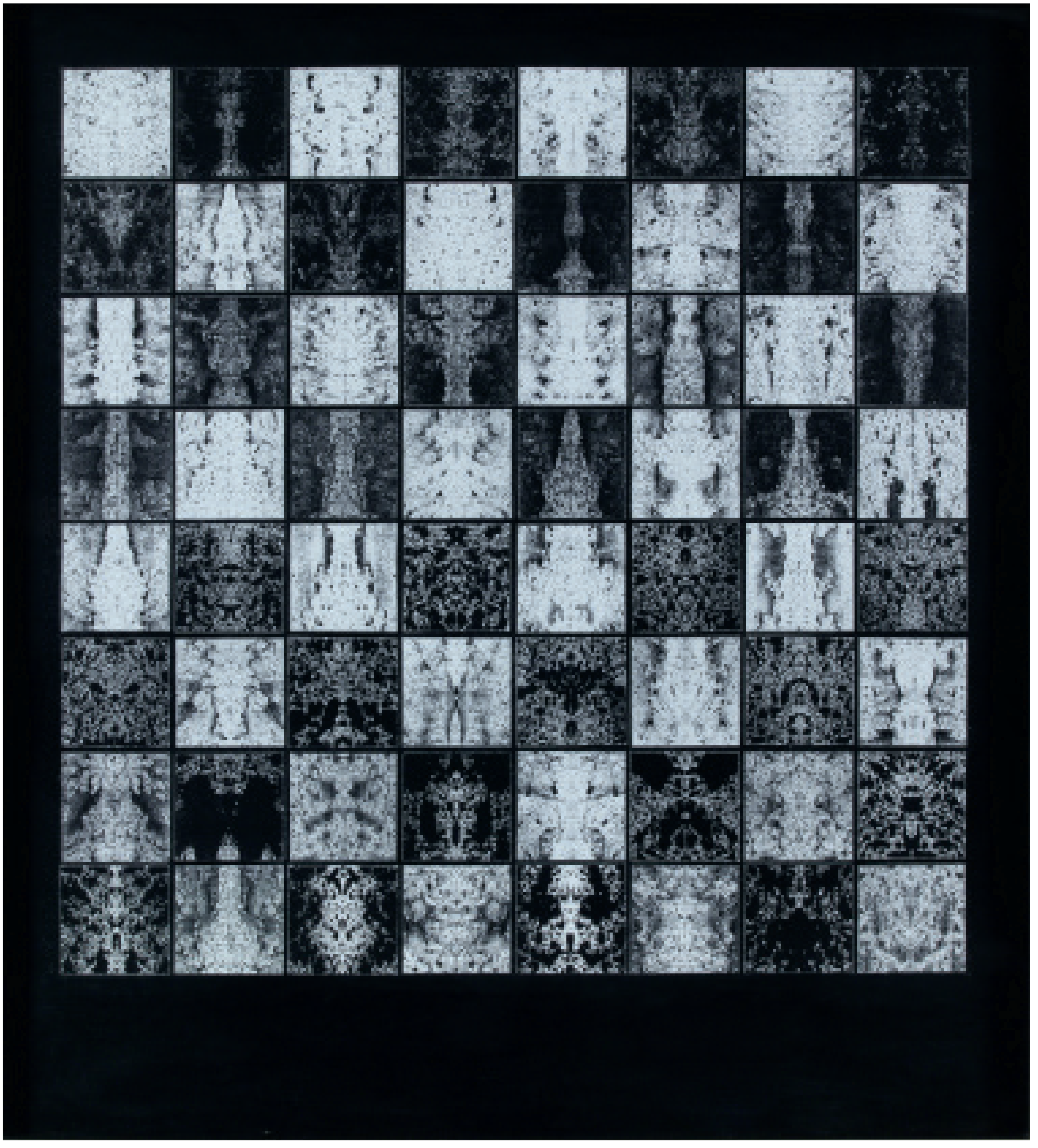
199 **UNTITLED** April 24, 1995 Ink on paper
9 5/8 × 9 7/16 in. (24.5 × 24 cm)
Collection of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson



200 **INKBLOT DRAWING** June 1, 1995 Ink on paper
23 × 29 in. (58.4 × 73.7 cm)
The Art Institute of Chicago, Margaret Fisher Endowment Fund



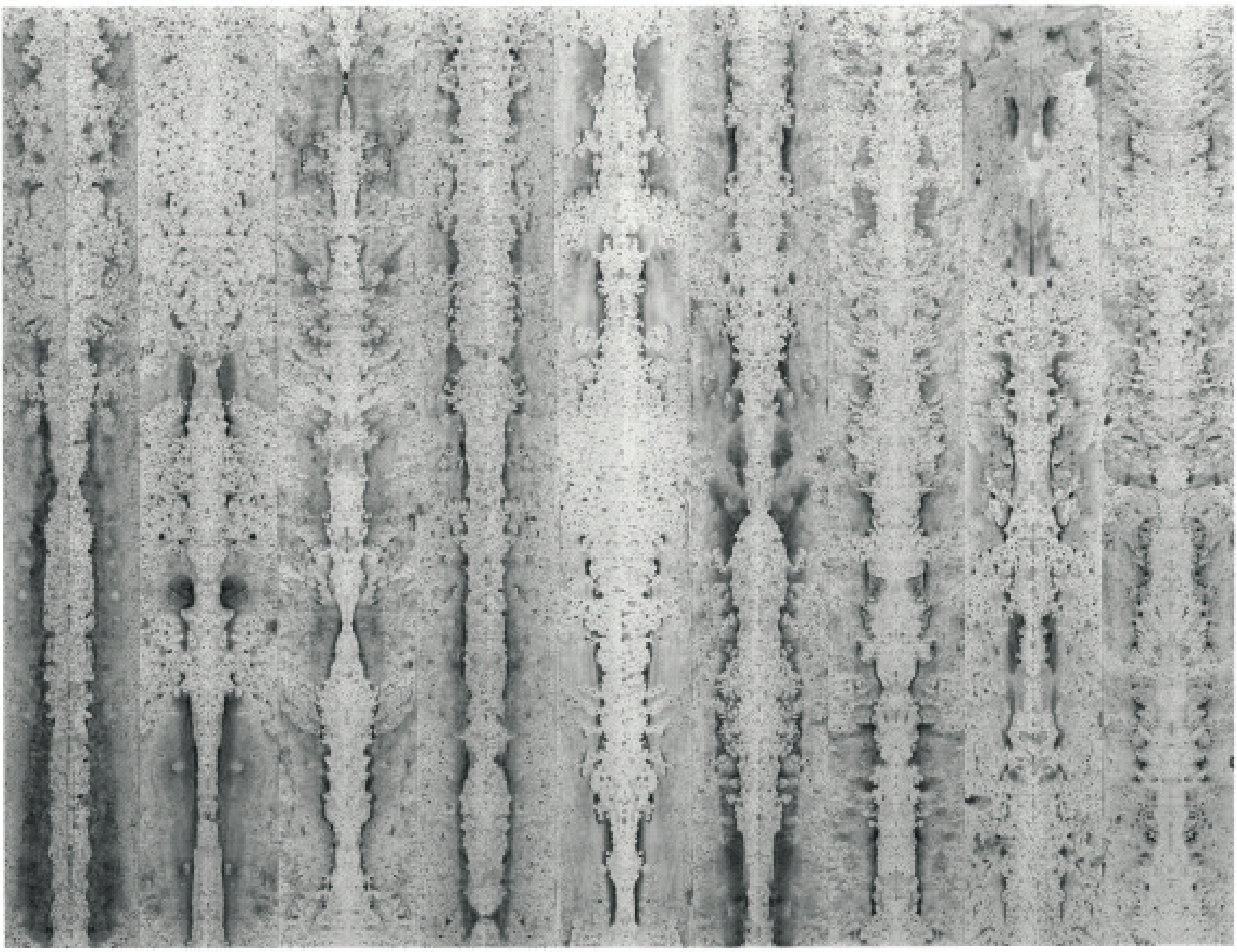
201 **INKBLOT DRAWING** July 21, 1995 Ink on paper
7 1/16 × 7 3/16 in. (17.9 × 18.3 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust



202 **CHESSBOARD** April 12, 1996 Ink on paper and acrylic paint on board
23⅛ × 21⅛ in. (58.7 × 53.7 cm)
Collection of Arthur G. Rosen



203 **MIRROR** June 27, 1996 Ink on paper mounted on board in artist's mirrored frame
16 × 11 ¾ in. (40.6 × 29.9 cm)
Collection of Michael Kohn and Caroline Styne, Los Angeles



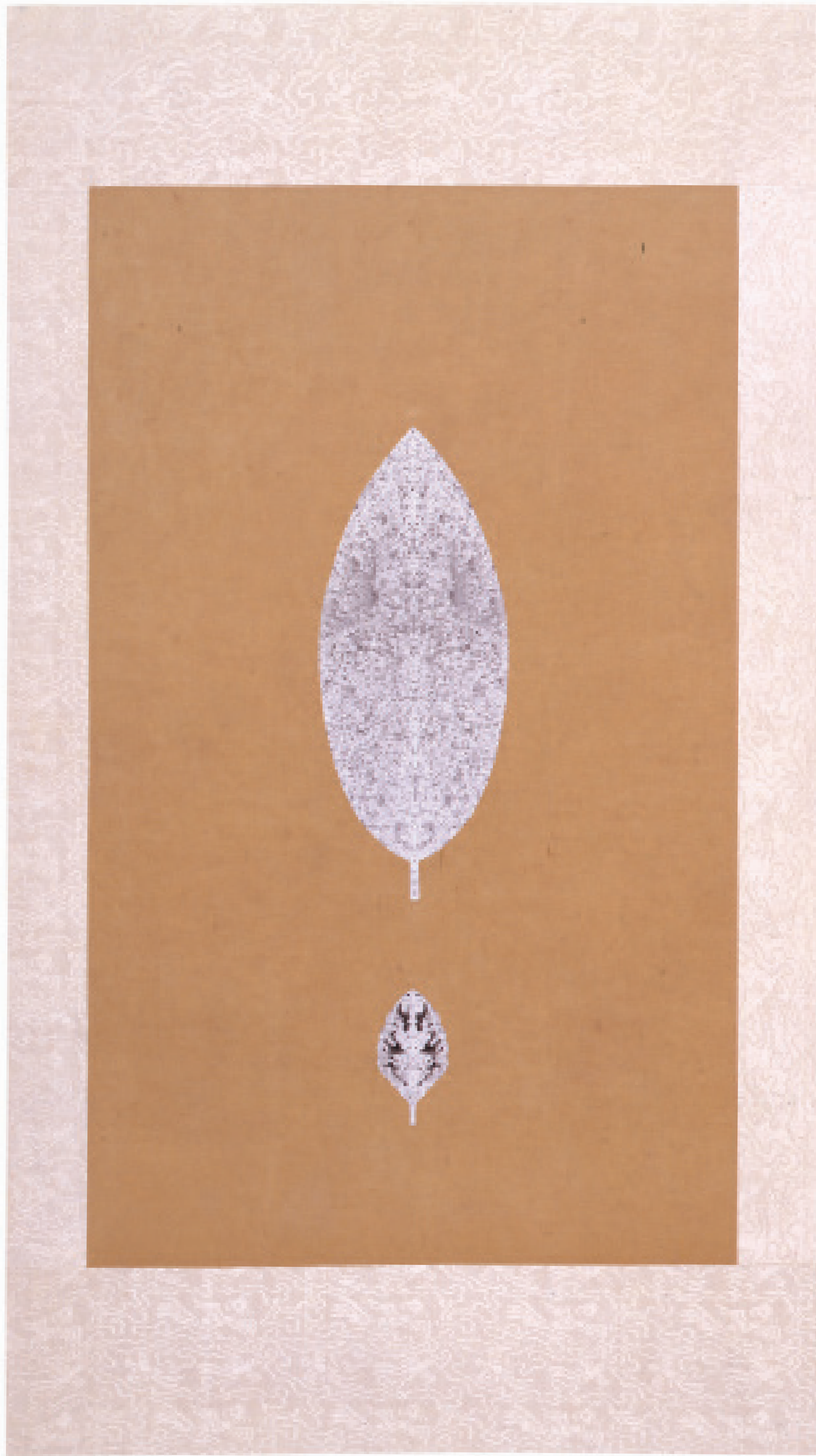
204 **BURNING BRIGHT** 1996 Ink on paper mounted on board
27 5/8 × 36 in. (70.2 × 91.4 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund: gift of the Gerson and Barbara Bakar Philanthropic Fund, Collectors' Forum, Diane and Scott Heldfond, Patricia and Raoul Kennedy, Byron R. Meyer, Phyllis and Stuart G. Moldaw, Madeleine H. Russell, Chara Schreyer, Elle Stephens, Norah and Norman Stone, and Phyllis C. Wattis



205 **INKBLOT DRAWING** November 24, 1996 Ink on paper mounted on scroll
36 7/16 × 16 13/16 in. (92.6 × 42.7 cm)
Buckingham Family Collection



206 **UNTITLED** February 25, 1997 Ink on paper mounted on scroll
34 1/4 × 17 5/8 in. (87 × 44.8 cm)
Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

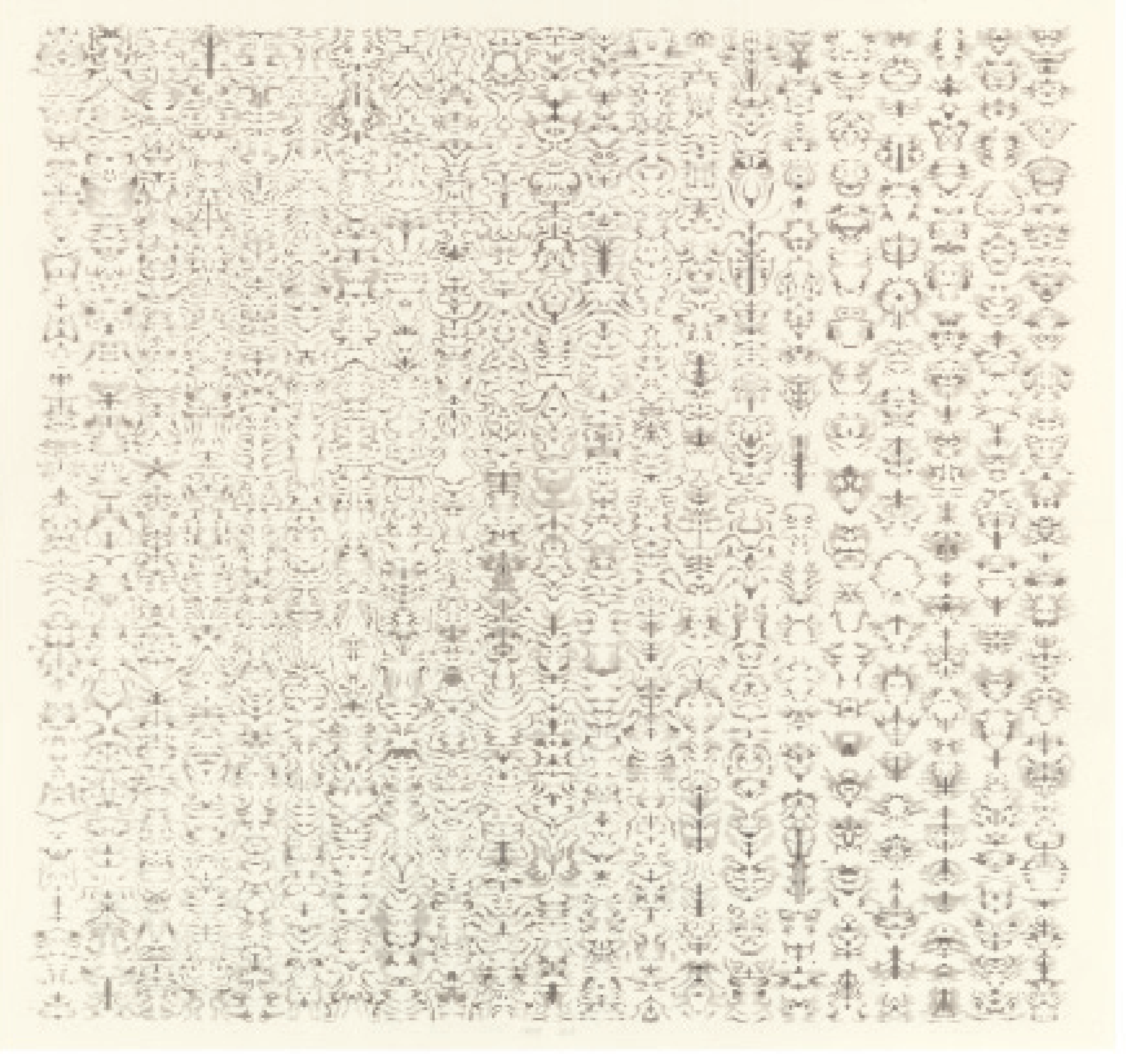


207 **TWO LEAVES** September 11, 2001

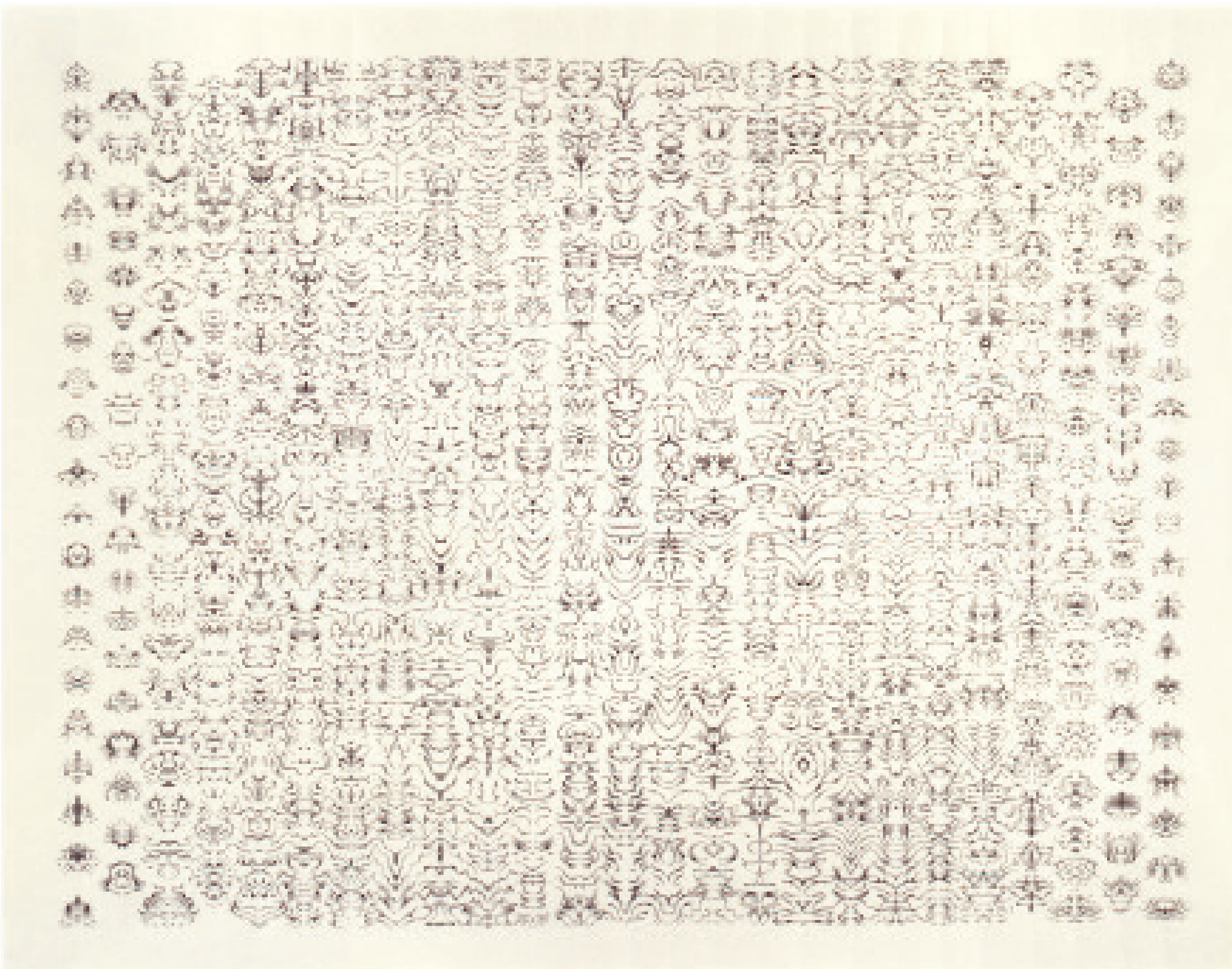
Anonymous
Ink on paper mounted on scroll
30½ × 17¼ in. (77.5 × 43.8 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust and Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles



208 **MAGNETIC DUST** April 7, 1997 Ink on paper mounted on board in artist's mirrored frame
26½ × 25 in. (67.3 × 63.5 cm)
Collection of Johnson Fain Architects, Los Angeles

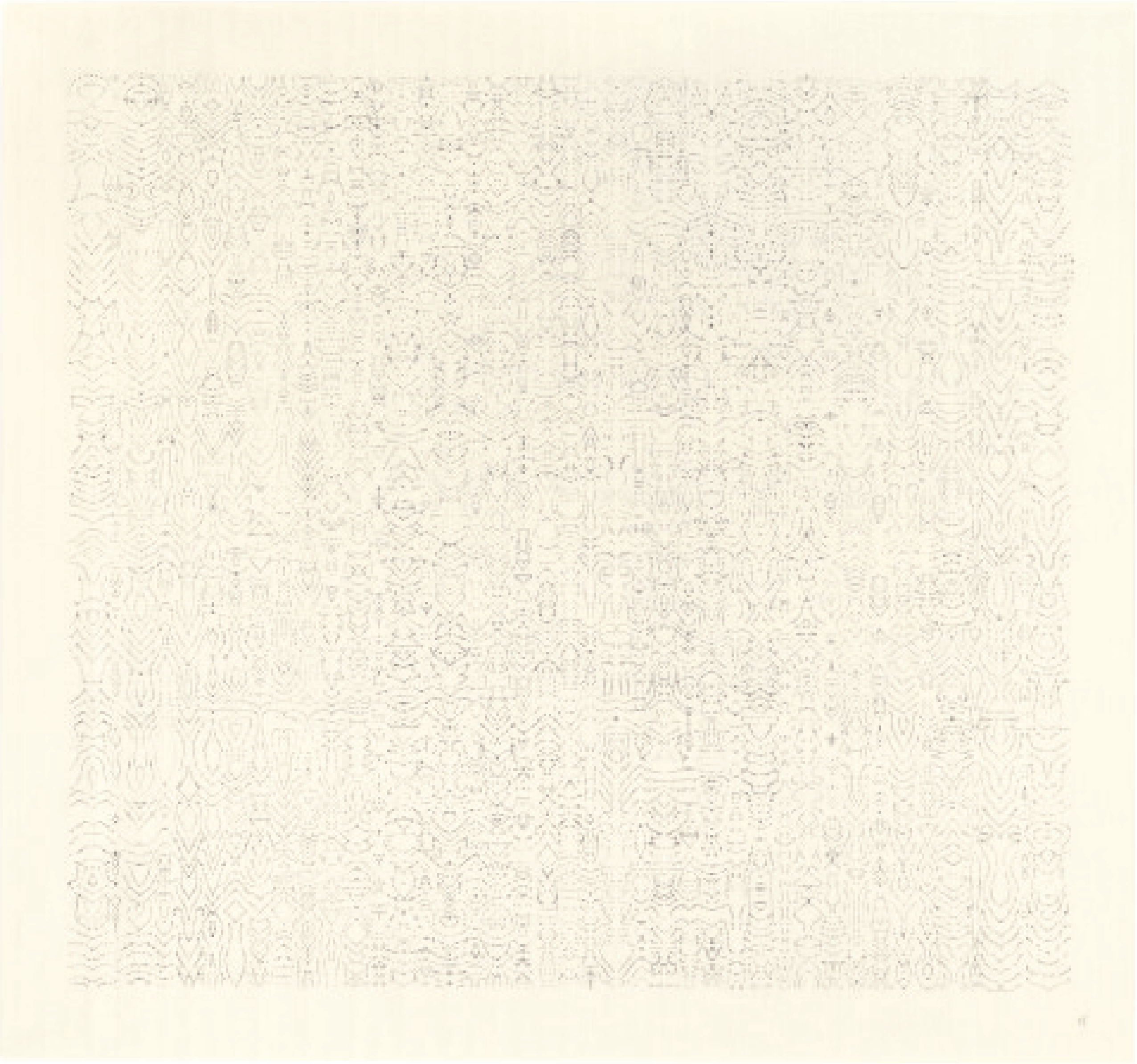


209 **INKBLOT DRAWING** May 8, 1998 Ink on paper
15 × 16 in. (38.1 × 40.6 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy



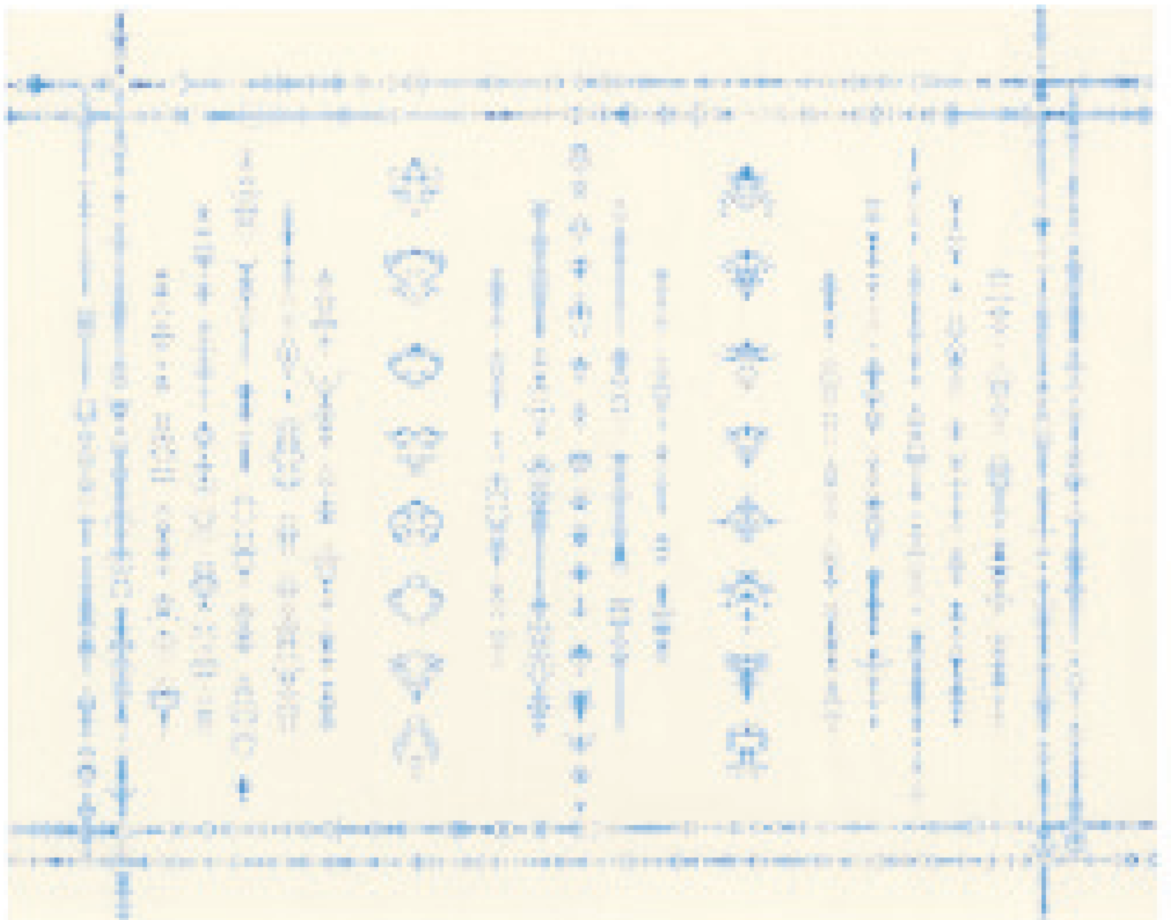
210 **RIPPLES** August 22, 1999

Anonymouse
Ink on paper
23 1/8 × 29 in. (58.7 × 73.7 cm)
Collection of Peter Acheson



211 **UNTITLED** November 10, 2002

Emily Feather
Ink on paper
23 × 28 ¾ in. (58.4 × 73 cm)
Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

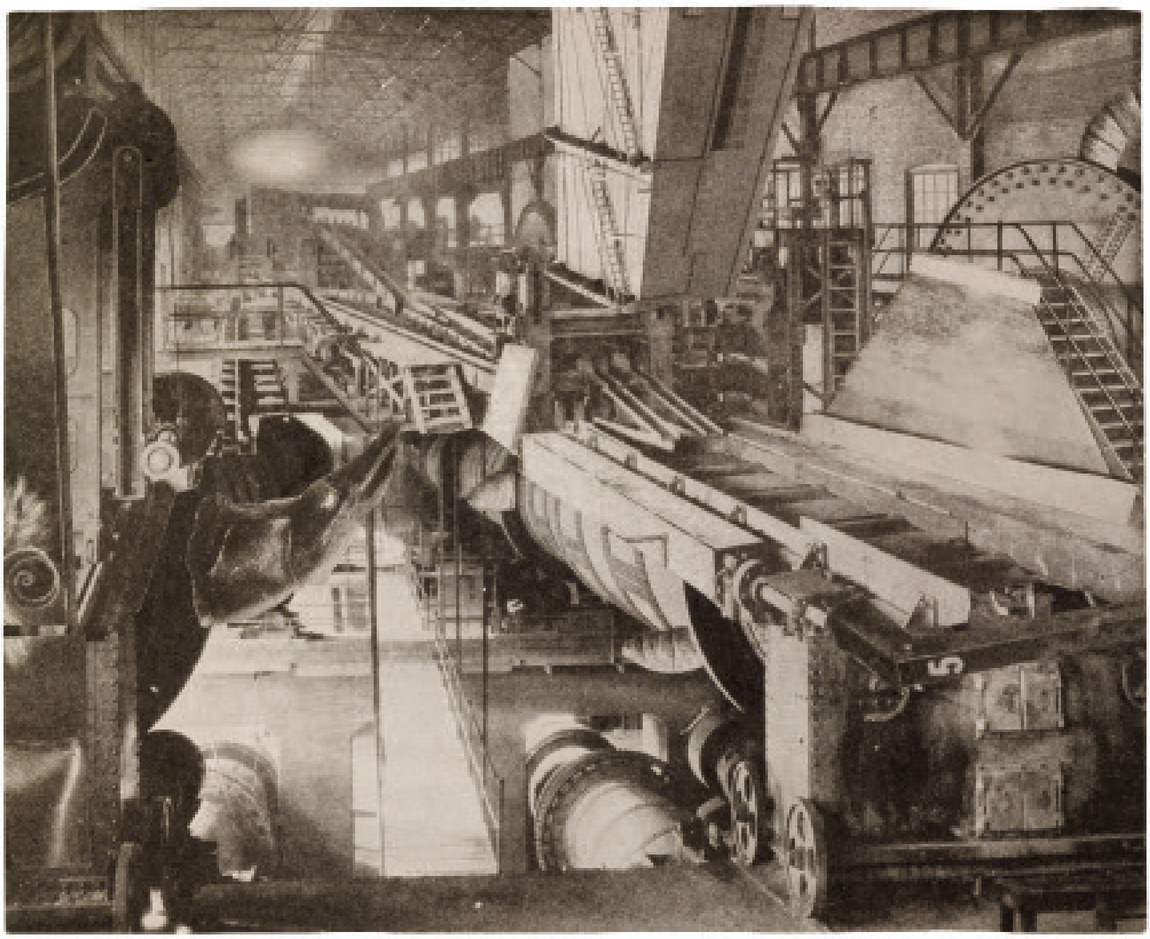


212 **INKBLOT DRAWING** May 5, 2005

Emily Feather
Ink on paper
11½ × 14½ in. (29.2 × 36.8 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



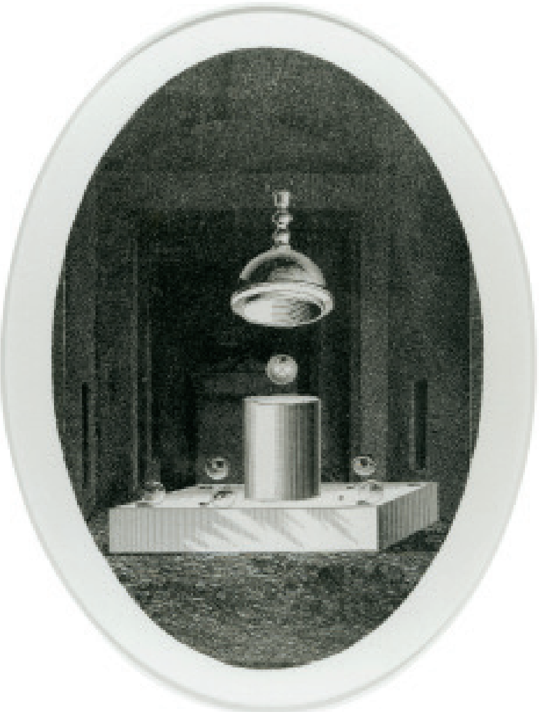
213 **DIVER** 1960 Collage of found illustrations in artist's frame
4 ½ × 2 ¼ in. (11.4 × 5.7 cm)
Collection of G. B. Carson



214 **THE FACTORY** 1961 Collage of found illustrations
6 ¼ × 7 ½ in. (15.9 × 19.1 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy



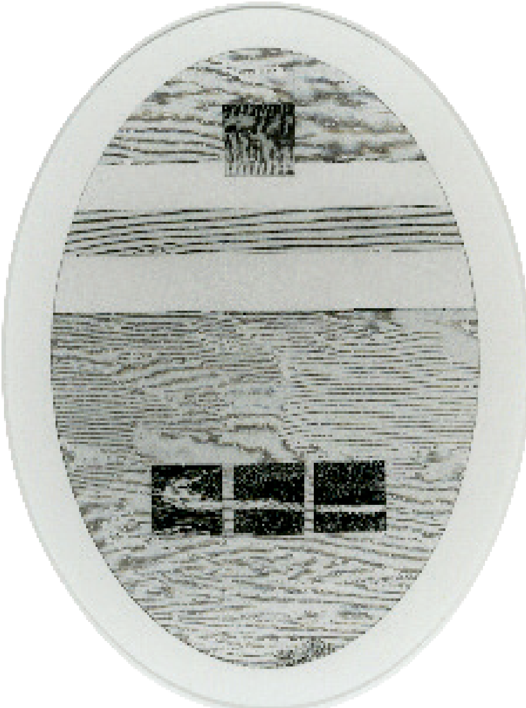




216 **UNTITLED** October 9, 1982 Collage of found illustrations
6 11/16 × 4 1/2 in. (17 × 11.4 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust

215 **UNTITLED #3** August 20, 1981 Collage of found illustrations
6 1/2 × 4 1/2 in. (16.5 × 11.4 cm)
Collection of Miranda Carson and G. B. Carson

217 **EYES ENCHAINED** September 27, 1981 Collage of found illustrations
6 1/2 × 4 1/2 in. (16.5 × 11.4 cm)
Collection of Robert Harshorn Shimshak and Marion Brenner





218 **UNTITLED** September 9, 1981 (#2)
Collage of found illustrations with graphite
6½ × 4½ in. (16.5 × 11.4 cm)
Collection of Robert Harshorn Shimshak and Marion Brenner

219 **The Ballad of Lemon and Crow** 2002
Glenn Todd
Book with six photogravures by Bruce Conner and Anonymous Artists; designed by Andrew Hoyem; ed. of 300 numbered copies, including 30 with extra suite of larger prints and prose poems by Glenn Todd (shown here), and 26 lettered copies
Closed: 10¼ × 7 in. (26 × 17.8 cm); larger photogravures, each: 17¼ × 12¾ in. (43.8 × 32.4 cm)
Published by Arion Press, San Francisco
Courtesy Conner Family Trust





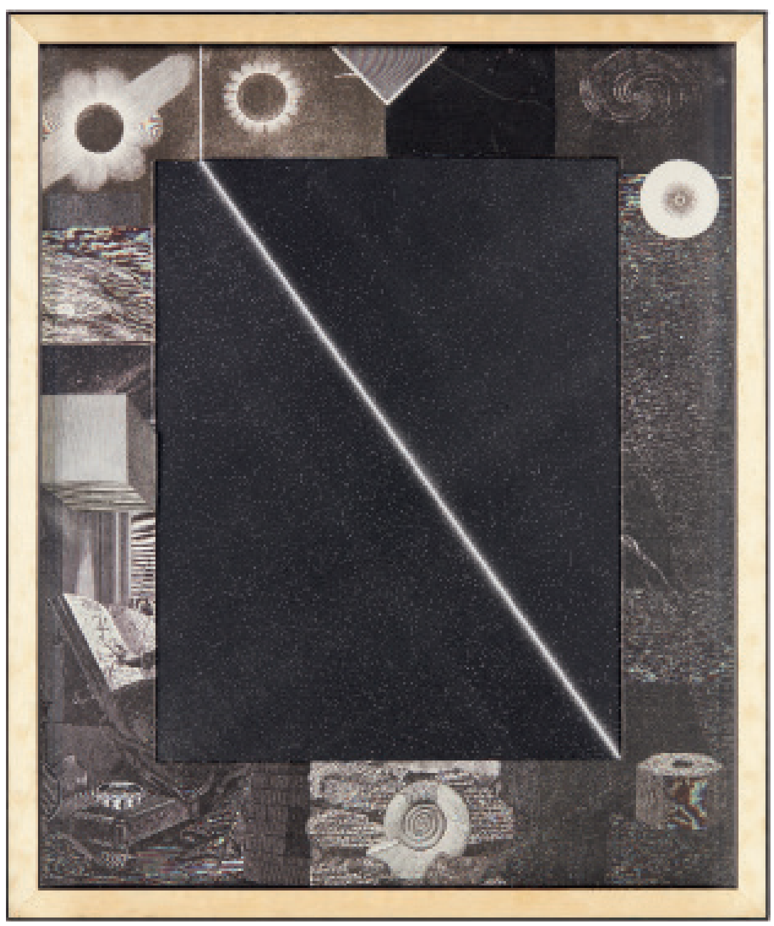


220 **UNTITLED** November 5, 1982 Collage of found illustrations with graphite
6½ × 4½ in. (16.5 × 11.4 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

221 **DUET** February 15, 1986 Collage of found illustrations
6½ × 4½ in. (16.5 × 11.4 cm)
Collection of Robert Harshorn Shimshak and Marion Brenner

222 **MAKING LIGHT OF DIOGENES** 1986 Collage of found illustrations
9½ × 7½ in. (24.1 × 19.1 cm)
Collection of Martin M. Hale Jr.

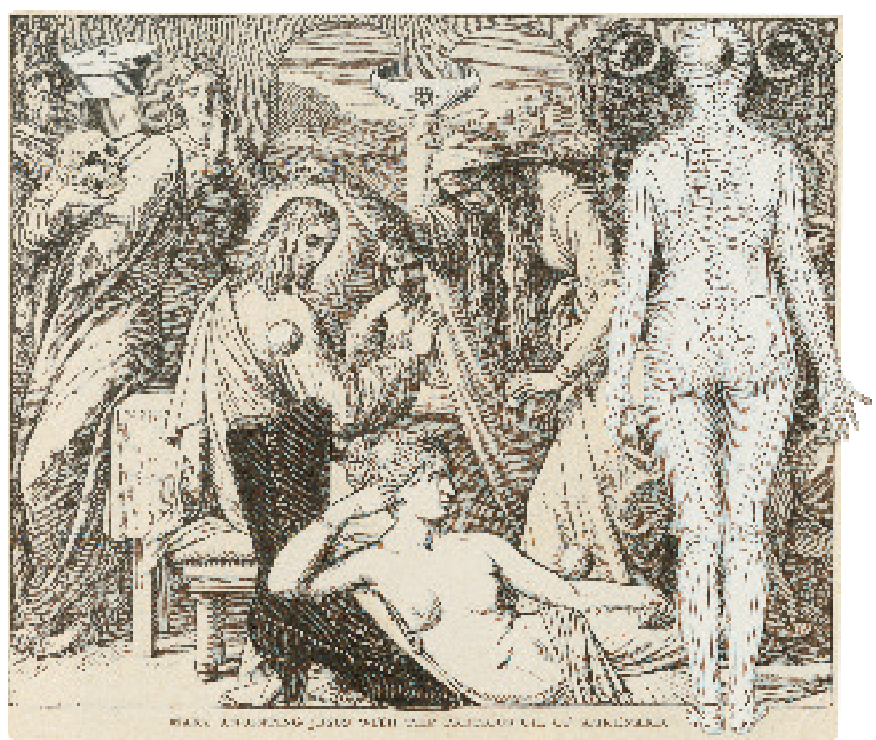




223 **FOUR SQUARE** February 15, 1986 Collage of found illustrations
7⅛ × 9¼ in. (18.1 × 23.5 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

224 **UNTITLED** December 17, 1987 Collage of found illustrations and photocopies
14¼ × 11¾ in. (36.2 × 29.9 cm)
Collection of Robert Harshorn Shimshak and Marion Brenner





225 **THE MINOTAUR AT BAY** 1987 Collage of found illustrations
6$\frac{11}{16}$ × 5$\frac{7}{8}$ in. (17 × 14.9 cm)
Balkanski Family Collection

226 **MARY ANOINTING JESUS WITH THE PRECIOUS OIL OF SPIKENARD** September 5, 1987 Collage of found illustrations
5$\frac{1}{4}$ × 6$\frac{13}{16}$ in. (13.3 × 17.3 cm)
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, museum purchase: bequest of Thérèse Bonney, class of 1916, by exchange



227 **BLINDMAN'S BLUFF** September 13, 1987 Collage of found illustrations
6 ⅝ × 6 in. (16.8 × 15.2 cm)
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, purchase made possible by the Norma H. Schlesinger, Andrew and Paul Spiegel Fund

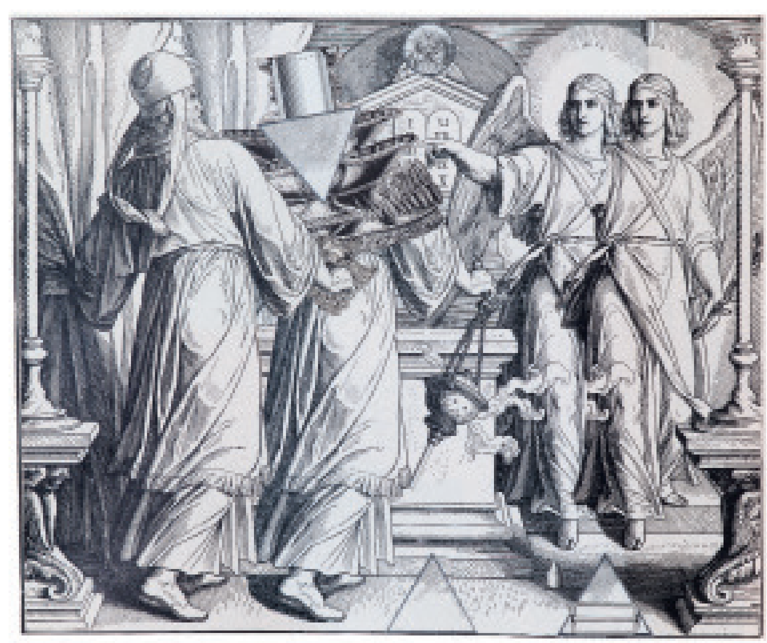




228 **CHRIST CASTING OUT THE LEGION OF DEVILS** September 21, 1987
Collage of found illustrations with graphite
5 1/16 × 6 1/16 in. (12.9 × 15.4 cm)
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, purchase made possible by the Jan Boyce Fund for Contemporary Art

229 **THE SCRIBE** February 3, 1990
Collage of found illustrations
6 7/8 × 6 in. (17.5 × 15.2 cm)
Collection of Linda Cathcart





230 **THE KISS OF BETRAYAL** April 27, 1990
Collage of found illustrations with graphite
$7\frac{1}{16} \times 6\frac{1}{4}$ in. (17.9 × 15.9 cm)
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, bequest of Thérèse Bonney, class of 1916, by exchange

231 **DOUBLE ANGEL** April 2, 1991
Collage of found illustrations and photocopies with graphite
$6\frac{15}{16} \times 8\frac{7}{16}$ in. (17.6 × 21.4 cm)
Collection of Arthur G. Rosen





232 **PORTRAIT** February 19, 1992 Collage of found illustrations
14 ½ × 12 ⅝ in. (36.8 × 30.6 cm)
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, museum purchase, Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts Endowment Fund

233 **BRUCE CONNER DISGUISED AS DENNIS HOPPER DISGUISED AS BRUCE CONNER AT THE DENNIS HOPPER ONE MAN SHOW** 1993 Collage of found illustrations
8 ¼ × 8 ¼ in. (21 × 21 cm)
Private collection



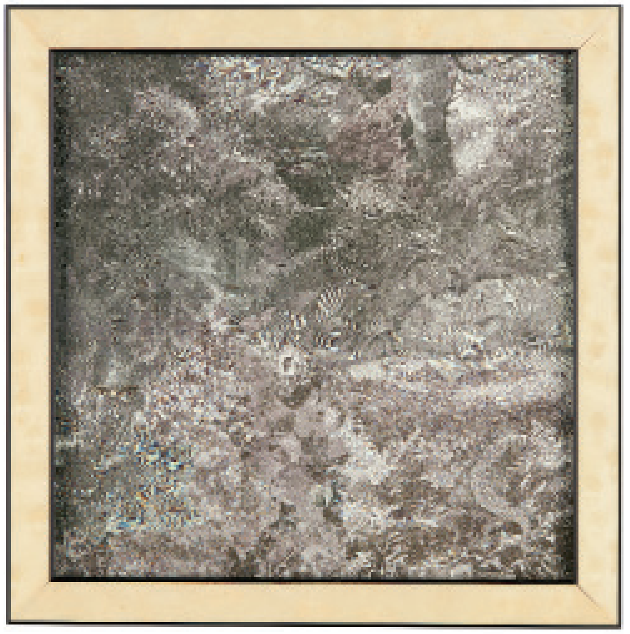


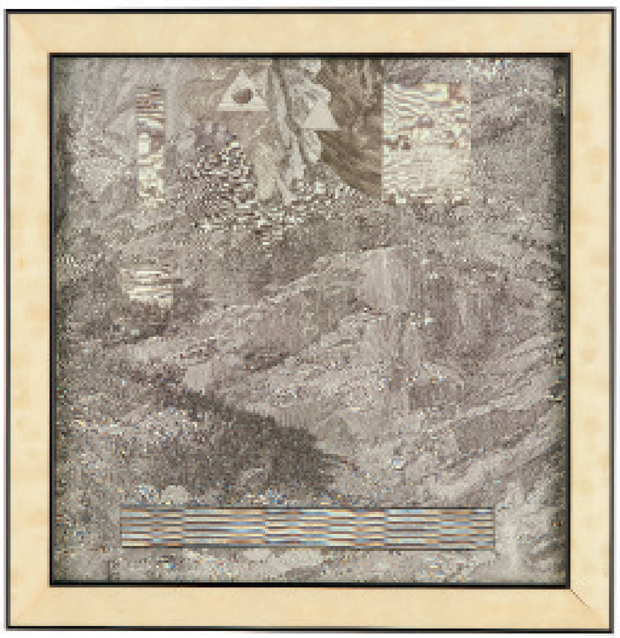


234 **AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD** April 23, 1995
Collage of found illustrations and photocopies
6¼ × 9 5/16 in. (15.9 × 23.7 cm)
Collection of Ann Birks

236 **UNTITLED** November 9, 1996/2002
Collage of found illustrations
7 5/8 × 4¾ in. (19.4 × 12.1 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

235 **A VISION (FOR W. B.)** September 25, 1996
Collage of found illustrations with graphite
11½ × 9 1/8 in. (29.2 × 23.2 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy







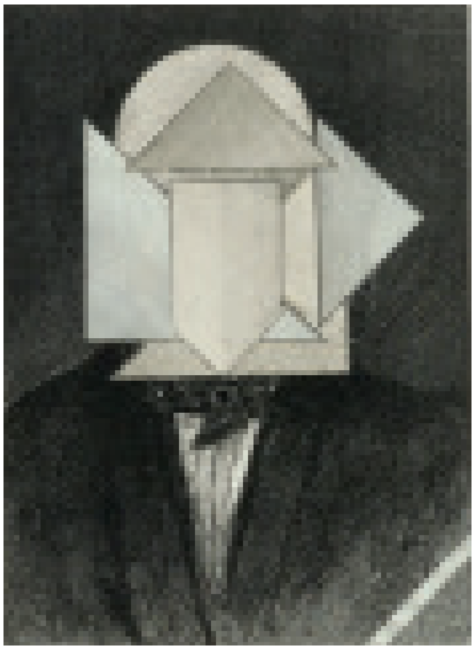
238 **LANDSCAPE** September 21, 1998 Collage of found illustrations
6½ × 6½ in. (16.5 × 16.5 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust

237 **LANDSCAPE** September 18, 1998 Collage of found illustrations with graphite
6½ × 6½ in. (16.5 × 16.5 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust

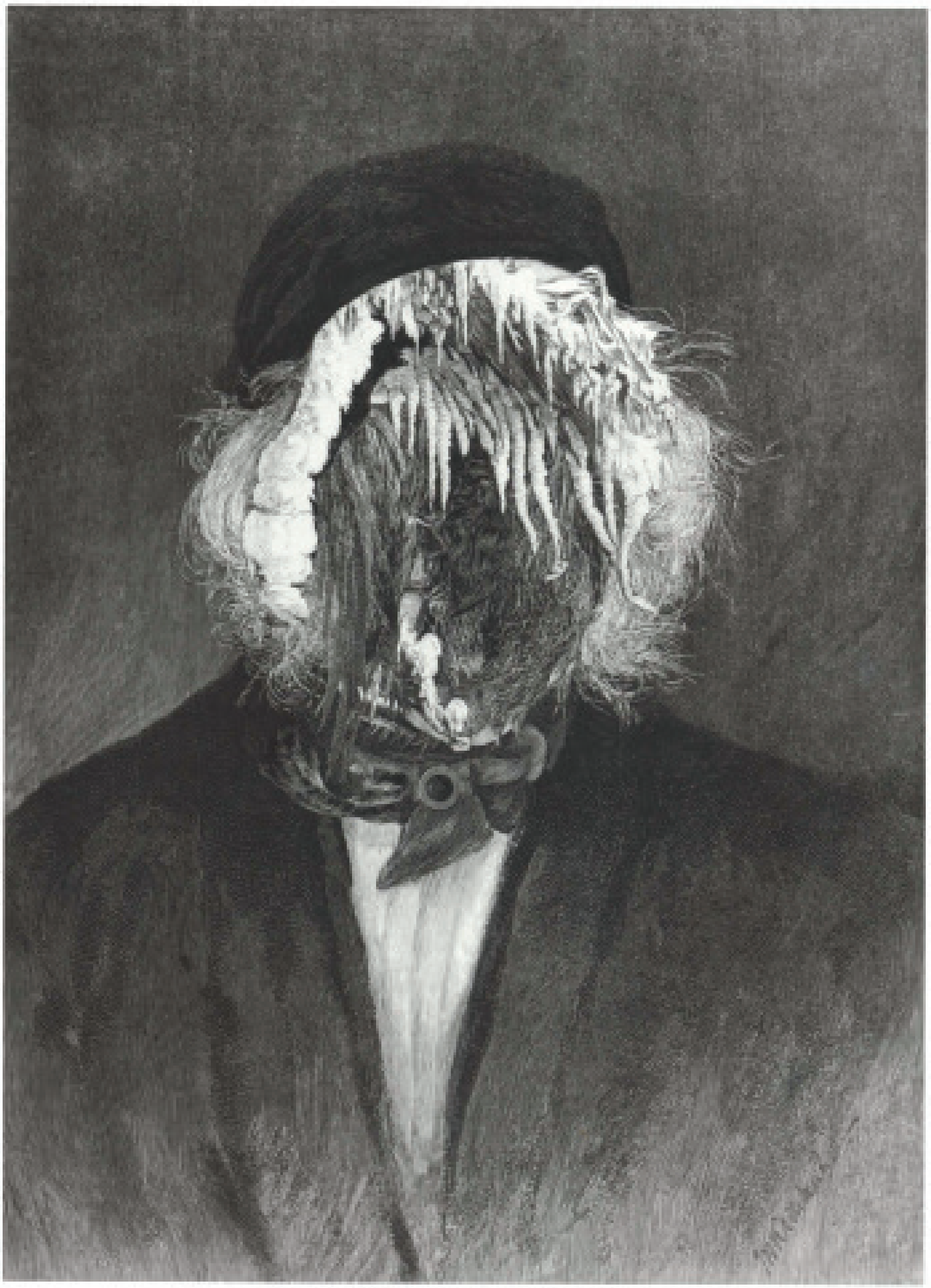
239 **LANDSCAPE** 1998 Collage of found illustrations with graphite
6½ × 6½ in. (16.5 × 16.5 cm)
Collection of Diana David and Frank English



240 **JULY 4, 1990** May 19, 1990 A prophetic paper collage
14½ × 12 in. (36.8 × 30.5 cm)
Collection of Robert Harshorn Shimshak and Marion Brenner



241 **PORTRAIT** 1990 Collage of found illustrations
6½ × 5 in. (16.5 × 12.7 cm)
Collection of Robert Harshorn Shimshak and Marion Brenner



242 **THE ARTIST** March 21, 1990 Collage of found illustrations
13⅛ × 9½ in. (33.3 × 24.1 cm)
Collection of Joel Wachs

THE ARTIST

for Bruce Conner

THE ARTIST has faces that are nude ladies and feathers.
Women pose in the visage of the whirlpool
    raising bare arms and arching bare thighs.
Tentacles of squid sway down among pinions
of African eagles from the artist's beret
and they tangle white hair.
  In the blackness of his face, spider webs and lichens
  are matted together making a waterfall that splashes
  down to the chin.
His head tilts down, staring into the vision.
The glow of his consciousness
            is an aureole.

  —A HUGE WHOLE THOUGHT in all of its myriadness
          is what he grasps for.
His black velvet beret is a dome of power
          in the haunted light of the room.

IT IS ALL OUT THERE.
EVERYTHING IS OUT THERE!
     It is superlatively clear.
It will all come together in connected fragments
—oceanic!—floating—everywhere
     in the nineteen directions.
He sees it clearly—it is all so endless,
so sensory.

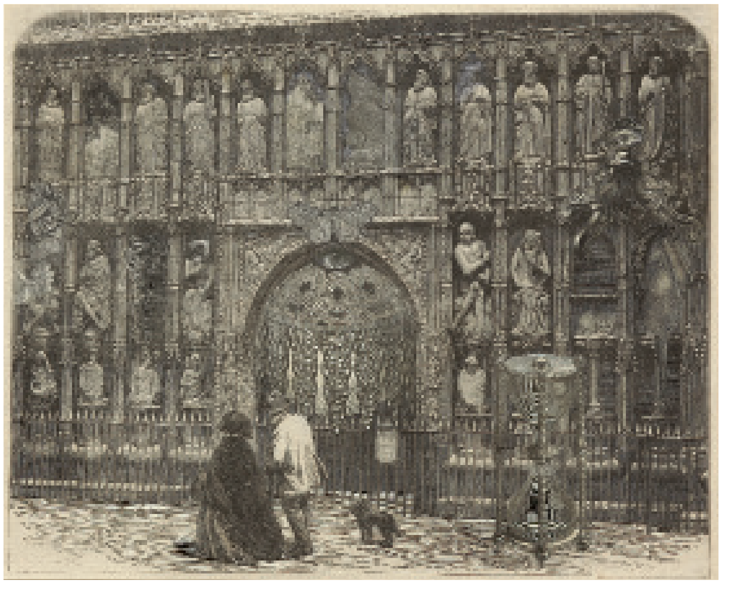
His satin neckband is twisted and knotted
with demon emanations.
His gentle old jacket is awash
with mystic
wrinklings.

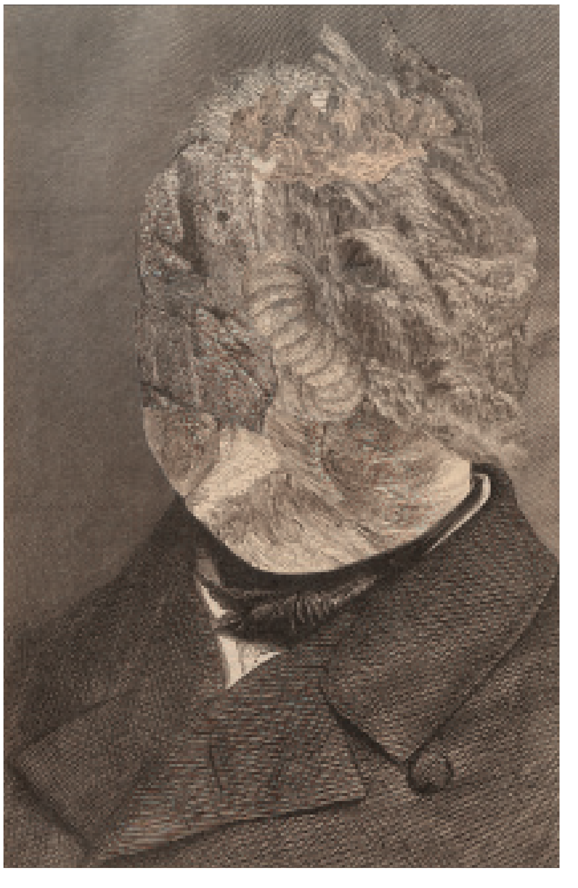
The jewel that he wears is a star cluster
carved out of coal.

Horseback rides are engraved in the gold frame,
there are childhood memories of fields of grass
     with a mouth on each blade
telling stories
of the origins of pure matter and nothingness.
Foxes circle around it all
and they bark
in honor
of the softness of mulberries.

Michael McClure, 1990



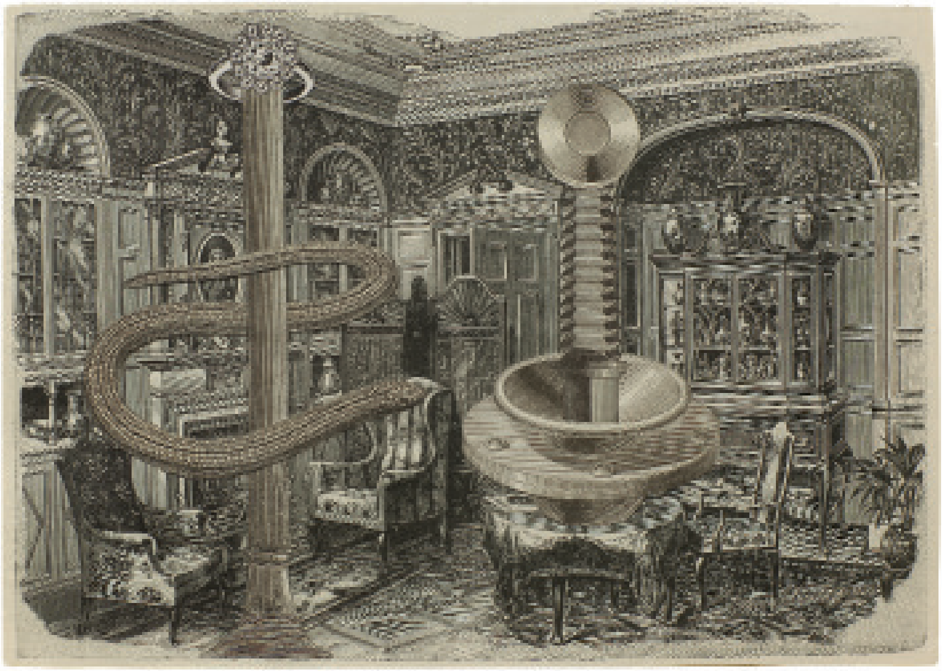




243 **PSYCHEDELICATESSEN OWNER** March 31, 1990 Collage of found illustrations
8 × 5 7/8 in. (20.3 × 14.9 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

244 **FACADE** April 15, 1990 Collage of found illustrations
7 5/8 × 8 3/4 in. (19.3 × 22.2 cm)
Collection of Blair Moll, New York

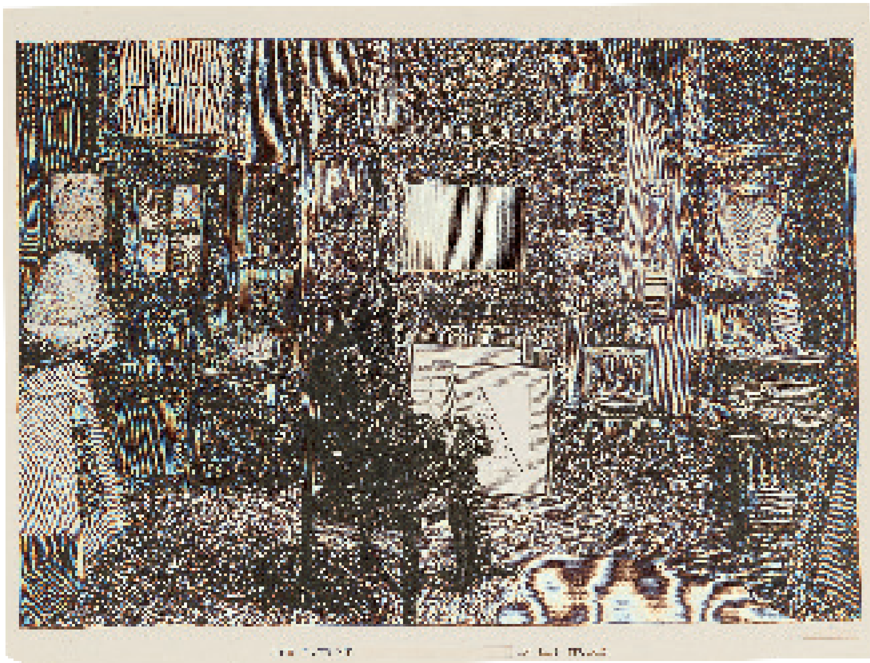
245 **SAD** May 4, 1990 Collage of found illustrations
8 1/2 × 5 1/2 in. (21.6 × 14 cm)
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive,
museum purchase: bequest of Thérèse Bonney, class of 1916, by exchange

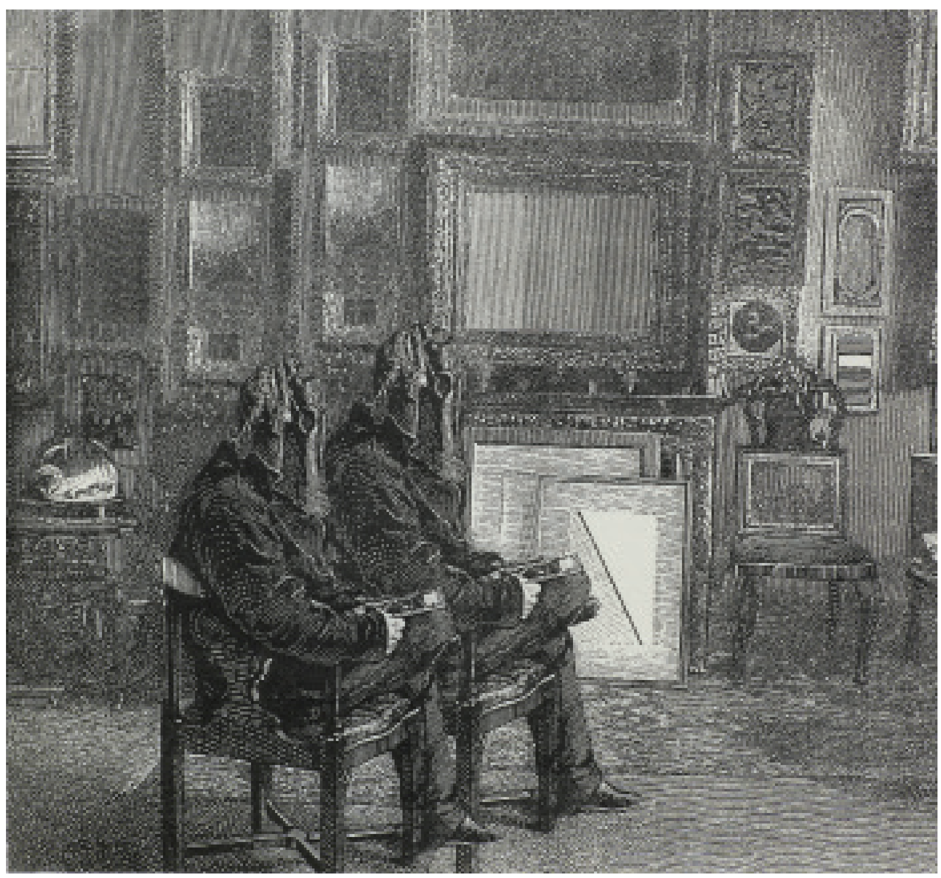




246 **DRAWING ROOM** March 2, 1990
Collage of found illustrations
5 × 7 in. (12.7 × 17.8 cm)
Collection of Jennifer Simchowitz

247 **ISABELLA** March 19, 1990
Collage of found illustrations with graphite
7⅞ × 7⅜ in. (20 × 18.7 cm)
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Michael Kohn and Caroline Styne in honor of Michael Govan





248 **THE LATE MR. ___ IN HIS STUDIO** 1999
Anonymous
Collage of found illustrations
5⅝ × 7⅝ in. (14.3 × 19.4 cm)
Courtesy Conner Family Trust

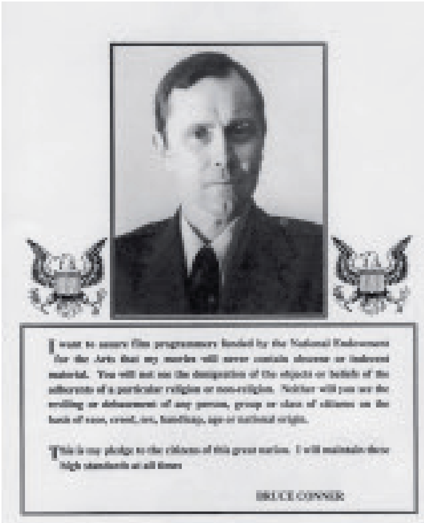
249 **THE LATE MR. ___ IN HIS STUDIO, VERSION A** 2000
Anonymous
Collage of photocopies
8½ × 9¼ in. (21.6 × 23.5 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy





250 **UNTITLED** ca. 2005 Collage of found illustrations
6½ × 4½ in. (16.5 × 11.4 cm)
Collection of Susan Inglett

Bruce Conner and Dean Smith
251 **UNTITLED** 2008 Collage of found illustrations
7 × 6⅛ in. (17.8 × 15.6 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Raymond and Beverly Sackler 21st Century Art Fund



46



47



48

46 National Endowment for the Arts pledge, 1989; printed in *Canyon Cinema Catalog 8 2000* (2000). Courtesy Conner Family Trust

47 Bruce Conner accepting a doctorate of fine arts degree from the San Francisco Art Institute, May 18, 1986. Photograph by Edmund Shea. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

48 *Lenny Pickett with the Borneo Horns* (1991); album cover artwork by Bruce Conner. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

Conner had become something of an elder statesman of experimental filmmaking by the 1980s, though he remained as contrarian as ever, in 1981 declaring himself a candidate for "crank filmmaker of the year" for his strong opposition to government funding for the arts (fig. 46).[133] He received the San Francisco Arts Commission's Award of Honor for outstanding achievement in film in 1985 and the American Film Institute's Maya Deren Award for Independent Film and Video Artists in 1988. His contributions to Bay Area art were recognized in 1986 as well, when he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the San Francisco Art Institute, where he had taught intermittently in the 1960s and 1970s (fig. 47).[134]

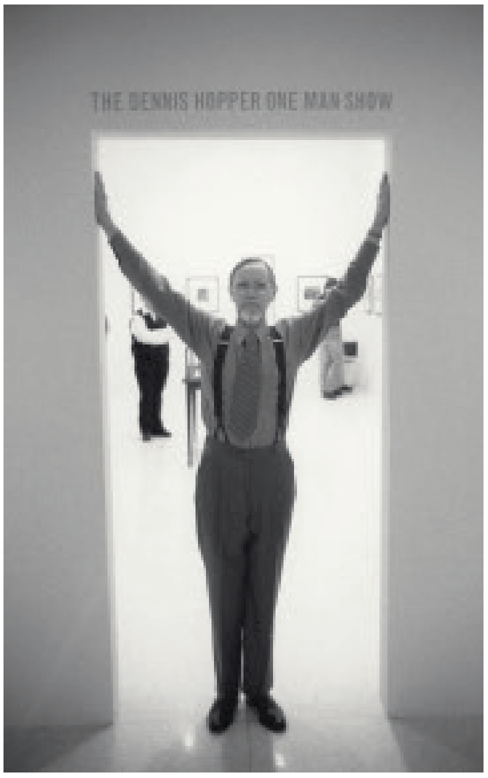
At the same time that he was working on THE SOUL STIRRERS, Conner was collaborating with the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles on what was to be a major survey of his work. In early 1986, three years after discussions began, Conner vented his frustration at the slow progress of the exhibition in a letter to a MOCA curator:

> When I wrote to you September 28, 1985, I enclosed a clipping which described the character of the disease called sclerosing cholangitis and the prognosis that few people survive more than a few years after the illness is diagnosed. Because this is the disease that I have to live with and, perhaps, die from, I told you that "my participation in the retrospective will now be determined by how quickly dialogue and decisions are engaged" and that I would not be "patient for the process to continue as in the past". . . . For this reason I sincerely regret that I cannot participate in a large retrospective or survey of my artwork to be organized by MOCA.[135]

133 Bruce Conner in Mitch Tuchman, "Independents: Bruce Conner Interviewed by Mitch Tuchman," *Film Comment* 17, no. 5 (Sept.–Oct. 1981): 76. More than a decade and a half later, amid the culture wars of the 1990s, he published an editorial in which he announced his willingness "to step back and watch the inevitable process of dissolution of the NEA." "It's time to take art out of the hands of the politician and give it back to the artists and people who love it," he concluded. Bruce Conner, "NEA Feels the Cutting Edge," *San Francisco Examiner*, July 20, 1997, B9.

134 He had wanted to call one of his classes "Wasted Time," describing it as "unproductive activity of no practical application" but had encountered resistance from SFAI director Fred Martin and called it "Undergraduate Seminar" instead. Conner, interview by Richards, Apr. 22, 1985. The artist Natasha Nicholson, who says she took a class called "For Women Only" in 1967, remembers Conner as a brilliant teacher, who encouraged students to reflect on their reasons for making art. Nicholson, telephone conversation with the author, July 2, 2015.

135 Letter from Bruce Conner to Kerry Brougher, Feb. 23, 1986, Paula Kirkeby/Smith Andersen Gallery Collection of Bruce Conner, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.



49

49 Bruce Conner at the opening of *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, October 8, 1999

He brought an exhibition proposal to the University Art Museum at Berkeley, whose director took it up enthusiastically. As with previous efforts, however, the relationship soon turned adversarial. The exhibition, which was to be called *Light out of Darkness: The Art of Bruce Conner*, was not realized. "I am not starting again with another postponed show and another curator and I don't intend to discuss another show with any museum in the future," he wrote in the fall of 1987 to Peter Boswell, with whom he had worked on the MOCA show.[136]

In 1990 Conner once again entered into preliminary discussions about a survey of his work, this time with the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where Boswell was then employed.[137] The planning of the exhibition took the better part of a decade and encountered the same difficulties that had doomed earlier efforts; but perhaps owing in part to Conner's sense that it was his last opportunity to personally oversee such a project, the exhibition, titled *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II*, opened at the Walker in October 1999 (fig. 49).[138] As its subtitle suggests, Conner conceived the exhibition as a single installment of a larger project—as one in a seven-part series of exhibitions that would collectively constitute a full retrospective. He described *Part II* as a "selection of works in many media which have subject, concept, image, form, context, theory, etc., in common." Other parts would include a "complete survey of all sculpture" and a "survey of all collages and assemblages (no exclusions)."[139]

The culmination of years of hard work and strenuous attention to detail, *2000 BC* seems to have taken a toll on Conner. When informed shortly after its opening that he had been nominated for an honorary chair at the University of Georgia at Athens, he responded good-naturedly: "Thank you for your interest but I will not assume the position now that

136 Letter from Bruce Conner to Peter Boswell, Nov. 23, 1987, BCP.

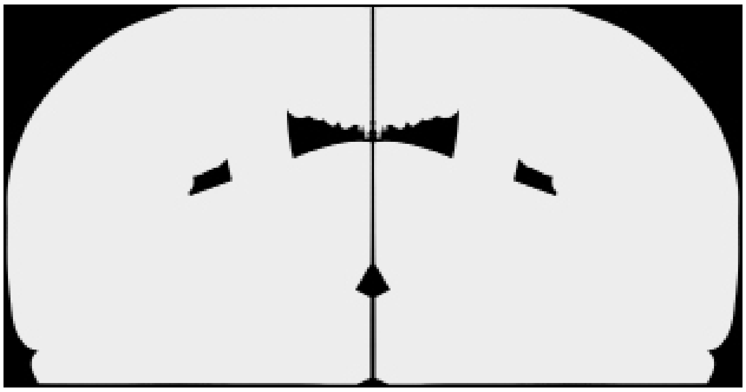
137 The Walker picked up the project at Boswell's urging. He had first met Conner in the early 1980s, when he was a graduate student at Stanford University writing a dissertation on the California assemblage movement.

138 The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue: Peter Boswell, Bruce Jenkins, and Joan Rothfuss, eds., *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999).

139 Bruce Conner, "The Bruce Conner Story: A Seven Part Series," unpublished proposal, Walker Art Center Archives, Minneapolis.



50



51

50 Anonymouse, UNTITLED, July 26, 1999. Ink on paper, 23 ⅛ × 29 in. (58.7 × 73.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift

51 Diogenes Lucero, TWIN, 2003. Pigmented inkjet print, ed. of 10; 14 × 27 in. (35.6 × 68.6 cm). Printed by Magnolia Editions, Oakland. Courtesy Magnolia Editions

I have joined Anonymous Artists. The twelve steps require total abstinence from artistic sitting."[140] Jean recalls: "He felt that he couldn't produce any more work because . . . everything he did had to be good enough to go into a gallery. . . . I told him, 'You don't have to sign them and you don't have to sell them! Just do them and put them in a drawer!' And so he started doing more inkblot drawings. He created 'Emily Feather' and started signing things 'Anon' and 'Anonymous' and 'Unsigned.' He did a tremendous amount of work after that."[141] Thus, it was not Bruce Conner but Anonymous who "was listening to the radio on 9/11 when the two airplanes collided with the World Trade Center" and responded by creating "a scroll inkblot drawing with two leaves falling" (pl. 207).[142] "Anonymous is everywhere doing the best work in every country in every century," he said. "The greatest artists have always been anonymous."[143] In the last decade of Conner's life, inkblots were produced by Anon, Anonymous, Anonymouse (fig. 50 and pl. 210), Emily Feather (pls. 211 and 212), and Justin Kase, personae that extended the technique in new and unexpected directions. "I used to tell people that after my wife and I would retire for the evening we would hear little rustling sounds going on in the middle of the night. The next morning the elves would leave inkblot drawings for me to look at," he said, leaving open the question of whether some of these works were in fact produced by artists other than himself.[144] Several anonymous engraving collages were created, as were prints by Diogenes Lucero (fig. 51) and BOMBHEAD (fig. 15), which draw on motifs from Conner's earlier work.

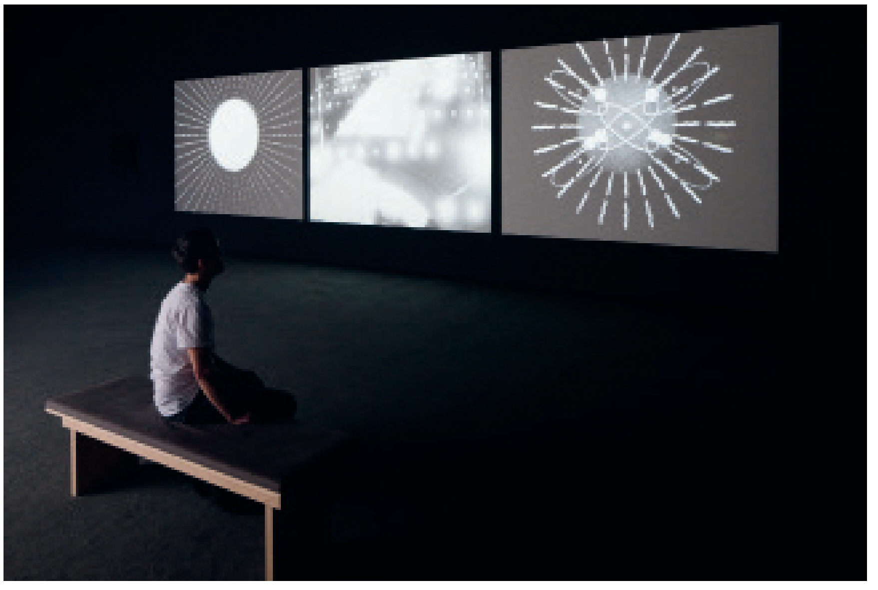
140 Letter from Bruce Conner to Andy Nasisse, Oct. 26, 1999, Paula Kirkeby/Smith Andersen Gallery Collection of Bruce Conner, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

141 Jean Conner in Matt, "Jean Conner in Conversation with Gerald Matt," 156–57.

142 Conner in Rasmussen, "Interview: Bruce Conner, Jack Rasmussen," 6.

143 Ibid., 5.

144 Ibid.



52

52 THREE SCREEN RAY, 2006 (pl. 252); installation view of *Long Play: Bruce Conner and the Singles Collection*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2010

Conner later affirmed his decision "not to sign any new work with my name when I retired in 1999 at the age of sixty-five," adding, "I *have* signed work that is an extension of what I had created before that time, reassembling them in another way, transforming the images."[145] This approach gave him license, even in retirement, to create new works using his own name. One such project was TAKE TWO: D.H.O.M.S., VOLUME ONE (2001), which contained reworked versions of the plates from the 1971 DENNIS HOPPER ONE MAN SHOW, VOLUME ONE, which he considered to be flawed.[146] He also produced a series of five tapestries whose sources were allegorical collages of the late 1980s (pls. 253 and 254), and the films LUKE (1967/2004, p. 329), THREE SCREEN RAY (2006, fig. 52 and pl. 252), and EASTER MORNING (2008, pl. 256), each an "extension" of an earlier work. Many of these projects demanded that he engage with digital technologies he had previously rejected, attesting to a desire to experiment anew with familiar techniques. He accomplished all of this in spite of his deterio-rating health, which further curtailed his productive hours.

145 Conner in Rasmussen, "Interview: Bruce Conner, Jack Rasmussen," 31.

146 TAKE TWO was published by I.C. Editions Inc. in New York.

FOLLOWING PAGES: 252

THREE SCREEN RAY 2006
Three-channel video projection, black and white, sound, 5:14 min.
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase

Narrative chronology continues on page 269

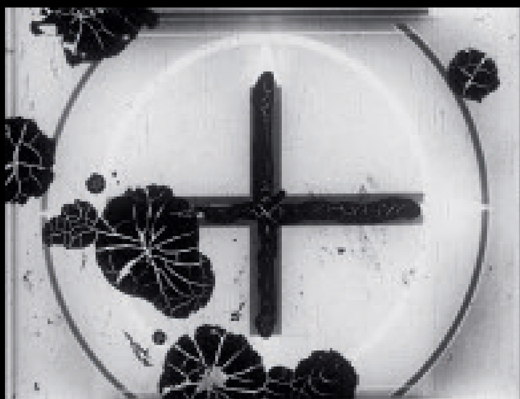
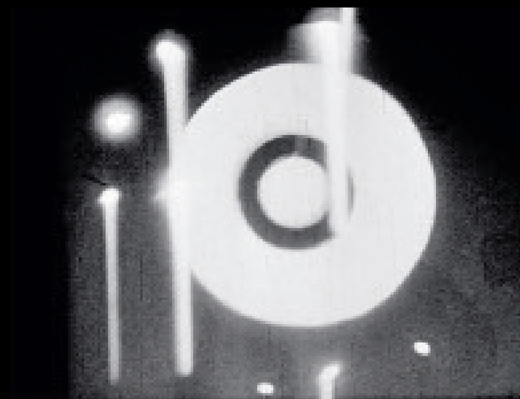
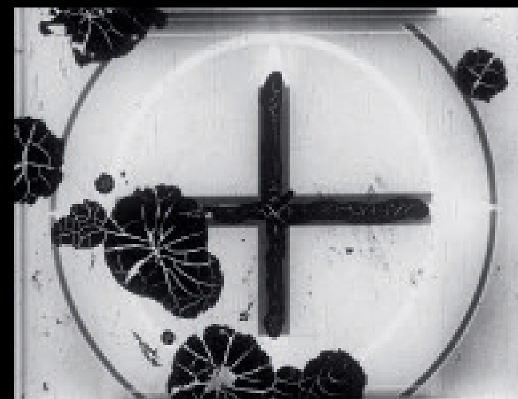







SIX


SIX




FINISH


FINISH





253 **BLINDMAN'S BLUFF** 1987/2003 Cotton-wool Jacquard tapestry
101 × 90 in. (256.6 × 228.6 cm)
Courtesy Magnolia Editions, Oakland, and the Conner Family Trust

254 **MARY ANOINTING JESUS WITH THE PRECIOUS OIL OF SPIKENARD** 1987/2003 Cotton-wool Jacquard tapestry
105½ × 115 in. (268 × 292.1 cm)
Courtesy Magnolia Editions, Oakland, and the Conner Family Trust

MORE ROCKS

Dean Smith

Shiny, sturdy golden brass handles gleamed everywhere at odd angles and occasionally the odd place. Bruce's mobility problems were becoming severe. With each weekly visit to his home, I noticed the brass handles proliferated, propagating as if mushrooms sprouting after a warm fall rain. Beyond the obvious sad fact of Bruce's diminishing health, there was something enchanting about this forest of handholds. They mirrored his working process: Take a mark, unit, object, element and *amplify it*.

Obsession. Bruce loathed the word. Most would be inclined to say that the brass handles were yet another example of his perceived obsessive, excessive personality—surfeit of detail and intent commonly being confused, mentally and visually, for compulsive tendencies. I'm reminded of the time an academic contacted Bruce regarding rights to an image for his publication about obsession and the visual arts. Misinterpreting the author's intent—the rejection of pathology being wedded to artists whose work trafficked in the obsessive—Bruce vehemently protested, having me relay his analogy of a brain surgeon versus an artist. No one, he astutely observed, would consider a brain surgeon *obsessive.* Considerable time, study, and dedication were necessary to achieve the exacting detail and perfection required of their craft, yet artists exhibiting the same rigorous, precise qualities are seen as manic, compulsive, neurotic.

Why the double standard? This process of hyperactivity, the excessiveness in Bruce's work, and its concomitant monstrous quality, rather than being obsessive, is actually a form of the grotesque. But the grotesque I'm thinking of is not the stock horror genre we typically associate it with—gruesome details, cheap thrills. Rather it's akin to what we see in the fantastical, profuse arrangements of disparate natural and decorative elements of Baroque architectural ornamentation. To quote literary scholar Wolfgang Kayser in his study *The Grotesque in Art and Literature,* "Grotesque art can be defined as art whose form and subject matter appear to be part of, while contradictory to, the natural, social, or personal worlds of which we are part . . . it confronts us as strange and disordered . . . it is and is not of this world."[1]

When amplified, the distortions, exaggerations, and fusions of incompatible parts that typify the grotesque can become visually overwhelming. Disquieting, absorbing arrangements of marvelous forms march across the page in tidy, regimented arrangements in Bruce's inkblots. We may be reminded of Rorschach's singular inkblots, devices used to reveal something of our own psychological makeup; but with amplification, scores of inkblots, Bruce circumvents the psychological and carries us into fantastical worlds, gardens of unearthly delights glutted with arrays of extraordinary, aberrant specimens.

Consider the hyperexcessive felt-tip pen drawings of the 1960s. At once cosmic, corporeal, and geologic, the drawings—whose tiny wormlike squiggles metastasize across the page with colossal density—exhibit a *horror vacui* that negates any sensation of human touch upon paper; they speak of a world that has never considered us. Visions of primordial time beyond even time itself. Space at once so thoroughly flat yet deep, ordered yet entropic, micro- yet macroscopic that our ability to categorize the image begins to dissolve—much like the drawings themselves appear to do. Yet both the inkblots and the felt-tip pen drawings are totalizing, monolithic in their territorialization of the visual field. Like all things grotesque, they revel in a state of indeterminacy, between one form, one state and another. Beautiful mysteries.

You see the play of the grotesque most clearly in Bruce's engraving collages: riotous, incongruous fusions of incompatible elements if ever there were. Much like the proverbial brain surgeon mentioned earlier, Bruce, with exacting, nimble skill and utmost attention to detail and craft, adroitly distorts our sense of the familiar by employing the surrealist strategy of cutting up and reassembling bits and pieces of preexisting imagery sourced from such nineteenth-century publications as *The Illustrated London News.* Bruce's degenerating physical self—which obliged the thicket of polished grips throughout the house—all but erased the adroitness required to meticulously assemble the flotsam and jetsam of a cut-up world. Necessity again pressing its burden upon him, Bruce asked my assistance in creating more collages. It was in the liminal space between direction and autonomy that I discovered myself to be another in a number of collaborators that Bruce had worked with in preceding decades.

In a filing cabinet, variously labeled manila folders—TREES, CLOUDS + SMOKE, BIRDS, INTERIOR EVENTS, FOREST LANDSCAPES, ROCKS—housed meticulously trimmed engraving fragments. Having directed me to pull various folders of my choosing, Bruce trusted I would make correct choices, that the jigsaw puzzle–like elements I selected and arranged would interlock into pleasing, surprising compositions. Reviewing various selections and arrangements, he would indicate approval with a simple "That's good," and must have felt I had a knack for it, for he frequently approved the combinations I made. However, Bruce was not above a good chewing out, as when I innocently threw away excess trimmings. Bruce yelling. Furious. Pointing at the waste bin demanding I fish out every single scrap. It was only later I came to see that such "scraps" could, in fact, prove very useful. Chosen elements were affixed with Yes! glue to cream-colored paper—the paper's tonality being similar to that of the wood engravings. Before gluing, each component's cut white edge was methodically made invisible by taking pencil to its contour. The aim was to create seamless environments of distortion and excess, mise-en-scènes that were simultaneously asylums from the ordinary and thresholds for adventure.

At a point shortly before he died, Bruce called from the hospital, hoarse but emphatic, demanding that I go over to his house and look at the two latest collages we were working on, Bruce having labeled their folders "BOX CANYON" (with the

additional written directive "Look for More Rocks") and "WOMAN/POND." Not to work, just *look.* No one home, the house a husk without him there. Such a strange request, still as cryptic as the moment he uttered it. It took a year to gain the perspective to finish these last two collages following his death.

Bruce, after asking to look at my work, proffered a pithy assessment—as worthy of his own drawings as it was intended for mine. Following a long, somewhat excruciating and silent scrutiny, he declared: "That's an all-day sucker."

1 Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).



53



54

53–54 VALSE TRISTE, 1978 (stills). 16mm, sepia, sound, 5 min. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

In 2004—several weeks after celebrating his fifty years in show business with Joan Jeanrenaud, Geoff Muldaur, Peter Selz, Rebecca Solnit, Terry Riley, and George Herms (who acted as "sergeant at arms"), among other friends—Conner received an unexpected letter from eminent art historian Leo Steinberg, who wrote:[147]

> You need not answer this letter. It comes to you in goodwill from a stranger, an eighty-four-year-old New Yorker with a long memory and a desire to share with you a recollection in which you are concerned. Some forty-five years ago, Alfred Barr of the Museum of Modern Art asked me to give three lectures on contemporary art at the Museum. In one of them, February 17, 1960, I proposed a working definition of my subject. "A contemporary art," I said, "is one about which nothing has as yet been published". . . . Then to demonstrate how a fresh, personal response may be articulated, I chose two artists who were just then showing in New York for the first time: the very young Frank Stella at the Modern's *Sixteen Americans,* and yourself at [Charles] Alan Gallery. . . . For years thereafter, I waited to see more of your work, heard you had gone into film, and at last, in 1967, rejoiced to see "Bruce Conner Makes a Sandwich" in *Artforum.* I felt a twinge of self-congratulation for having early recognized a mind of deep integrity and serious wit.

Steinberg concludes: "That's all I wanted to unburden myself of as I put my house in order. I hope you are a happy man."[148] Conner replied: "I am pleased to read . . . your comment regarding contemporary art being an art of unique firsthand experience without any prior judgmental commentary. I have always wanted people to view my work in that manner when it is first seen. The wonder and thrill of the phenomenon can't be duplicated. It wasn't easy to attempt to exhibit my work without the directions that galleries and museums want to place between the viewer and the experience of first witness." He enclosed a VHS tape containing TAKE THE 5:10 TO DREAMLAND (1977) and VALSE TRISTE (1978, figs. 53–54). The latter is his most autobiographical film. Conner, who would pass away on July 7, 2008, concluded, "Hopefully you will see them for the first time without preamble."[149]

147 Notably, it was Steinberg who originated the concept of the "flatbed picture plane," the artwork as a horizontal surface upon which objects and information are assembled. He cited Robert Rauschenberg's Combines of the 1950s as examples of this phenomenon but his analysis could be extended to Conner's collages and assemblages as well. See Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 82–91.

148 Letter from Leo Steinberg to Bruce Conner, Dec. 27, 2004, BCP.

149 Letter from Bruce Conner to Leo Steinberg, Jan. 7, 2005, BCP. Conner remembered Sibelius's *Valse Triste* as the theme music for the radio serial *I Love a Mystery*, which he listened to as a boy: "I wasn't supposed to stay up past ten o'clock. I would have to sneak out of bed to listen to it and hear it begin with the sound of a train in the distance. I showed [VALSE TRISTE] to my son Robert and he said, 'Oh, it looks like me in that movie.' Of course, I had been thinking it was *me.*" Bruce Conner quoted in Anthony Reveaux, *Bruce Conner*, Filmmakers Filming, no. 13 (Saint Paul, MN: Film in the Cities, 1981), 12. Conner told his friend Steven Fama that the "Highway 4" scene in the film was near his grandparents' farm. Steven Fama, "Childhood Experiences of Bruce Conner: A Compilation, or Looking for Trilobites in the Kansas Permian Strata and Other Stories from the Childhood of Bruce Conner," sixth revised/corrected version, May 7, 1997, unpublished essay, *2000 BC* exhibition records, Walker Art Center Archives, Minneapolis, 15.



Laura Hoptman

BEYOND COMPARE: BRUCE CONNER'S ASSEMBLAGE MOMENT, 1958–64

For a number of complex motives, in his lifetime Bruce Conner attempted to dodge categorization as an example of, or an adherent to, any artistic movement. His most common strategy to achieve this was to cite the relative isolation from the art world of San Francisco, the city where he lived and worked for fifty years. To an extent, this succeeded: his oeuvre is most often contextualized in a local or regional artistic milieu. In fact, though, Conner's remarkable early exhibition record beyond the West Coast belies this characterization. For the first half decade of his career, his assemblages and collages were featured in solo and group shows in major galleries and museums in London, New York, Paris, and Rome, and as a result were at the center of an international conversation concerning the emergence of neo-dadaist found-object sculpture, Junk art, Nouveau Réalisme, and even Pop.

Conner's worldliness started early. His exposure to modern art began in high school in Wichita, Kansas, where his art teachers introduced him to the work of Marc Chagall, Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, and contemporary artists like Robert Motherwell and William Baziotes.[1] He also worked briefly as a guard at the Wichita Art Museum[2] and had a circle of literary and artistic friends who eagerly read books such as Motherwell's *The Dada Painters and Poets* (1951) and essays such as original Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck's "Poe and Dada" (*Possibilities,* 1947) and Harold Rosenberg's "The American Action Painters" (*Art News,* 1952). Conner's goal as a young man, like that of most ambitious and savvy art students, was to move to New York. He made his first journey there in the summer of 1953 with his friend the aspiring poet Michael McClure, with the goal of "[gathering] in depth, secret knowledge about Abstract Expressionism and all modernistic art."[3] With the bravado of youth, Conner and McClure looked up Motherwell in the telephone book, called him, and cadged an invitation to the artist's home and studio. Conner returned to New York two years later, in June 1955. He brought paintings and collages, as well as slides of other work, with the intention of finding gallery representation. Against all odds, he impressed the Upper East

1 Letter from Bruce Conner to Charles Alan, 1957, Alan Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

2 See Kristine McKenna, "Bruce Conner in the Cultural Breach," *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 1990.

3 Bruce Conner in "A Conversation with Bruce Conner and Robert Dean" (Apr. 27, 1990), in *Bruce Conner: Assemblages, Paintings, Drawings, Engraving Collages, 1960–1990*, exh. cat. (Santa Monica: Michael Kohn Gallery, 1990), n.p.

PARTITION, 1961–63 (pl. 67, detail)

Side gallerist Charles Alan enough for Alan to buy three works and add Conner to his gallery roster in 1956, when the artist was only twenty-two years old. Although he would not give Conner a solo exhibition until 1960, Alan kept paintings, drawings, collages, and, subsequently, assemblages by him in his gallery inventory, and he included Conner's work in two group exhibitions in 1956 and 1958.

The Alan Gallery exhibited an eclectic stable of European and American artists, including figurative painters David Hockney, Jacob Lawrence, and Nathan Oliveira; Dadaists Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, and Kurt Schwitters; and several young Europeans on the periphery of Neo-Dada, including Italian artist Enrico Baj and British artist John Latham. Alan also represented at least a half dozen artists working with collage or found-object sculpture. Conner's paintings, collages, and assembled works had a peculiar resonance with Alan's broad, Continental aesthetic. The paintings he showed Alan in the summer of 1955 combined an animated, dimensional, expressive abstraction comparable to European painters of *matière* like Alberto Burri or Jean Dubuffet with ghosts of existential figuration reminiscent of the work of fellow San Franciscan Oliveira, but also of the portraits of Alberto Giacometti. During the second half of the decade, Conner's paintings became increasingly sculptural, their thickly painted surfaces carved, scratched, punctured, or otherwise manipulated to create more visceral, but also more dimensional, effects. Sometimes adorned with squares of canvas, board, or pieces of wire, Conner's works from this period hover between painting and collage.

The urge to create an artistic language that could not be defined by any single artistic category culminated in 1958 when painting, collage, and sculpture came together in what is considered Conner's first assemblage, RATBASTARD (1958, fig. 1 and pl. 10)—a pendulous sculpture consisting of a nylon stocking stuffed with, among other things, one of his own paintings that had been slashed through at its center. With this first properly three-dimensional object, Conner seemed to lose interest in mere oil on canvas, writing to Alan that "hamburgers with mustard are better than Abstract Expressionism."[4] Despite this disavowal and his embrace of sculptural assemblage, the painted surface continued to haunt his three-dimensional works well into the 1960s. RATBASTARD is only one of a number of assembled objects built with materials that include, on close inspection, abstract paintings. Conner also often painted on his assemblages. In works such as SPIDER LADY NEST (1959, pl. 18), white, black, or brown drips and brushstrokes obscure photographs, slop over wooden frames, and mark stretched pieces of nylon like shadows. PARTITION (1961–63, pl. 67 and p. 270), a large assemblage made of a standing privacy screen, features on its left panel (amid the stockings, fringe, and paper flowers) a large area of bright blue,[5] and the surface of PILLOW (1961–64, pl. 65)—

4 Letter from Bruce Conner to Charles Alan, undated (ca. 1960), Alan Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

5 The color has a distinct resemblance to Yves Klein's International Klein Blue (IKB), patented by Klein in 1960. Conner could have seen Klein's first U.S. exhibition, in 1961 at Leo Castelli Gallery in New York, where the French artist exhibited his IKB monochromes. Conner also knew of Nouveau Réalisme, of which Klein was a charter member. Conner's assemblages would be included in several major European exhibitions of Nouveau Réalisme in the 1960s.



1

1 RATBASTARD, 1958 (pl. 10, detail)

which is more like a series of collages mounted on a three-dimensional object than an assemblage—has been entirely painted on one side with small abstract motifs floating in large zones of red and blue. This early rejection of medium specificity in favor of a more hybrid kind of art making encouraged Conner to develop a complex and sophisticated language of found-object sculptural assemblage; it also provided him with a strategy to elude classification as either a painter or a sculptor, or even as a practitioner of assemblage.

Then, as now, New York representation for a young artist from Kansas with no previous exhibition history was a rare and noteworthy phenomenon,[6] but this early success did not convince Conner to live there. Instead, he and his wife, the artist Jean Conner, chose San Francisco, a city where a number of Conner's close friends from Wichita had already settled. In San Francisco in 1958, as he recalled, there was "little concern for the art establishment and society's requisites for diplomas, what is art and what is not art, etc." "Nobody was buying it," he stated flatly. "It wasn't a product."[7] Over the years and in numerous interviews, Conner described this dearth of commercial recognition for artists in San Francisco with pride, crediting it with encouraging the creative freedom of artists unencumbered by worries of selling their work. The lack of acknowledgment was no doubt true, but Conner nonetheless enjoyed exceptional recognition almost immediately. His national reputation grew impressively in the five-year period between his first visit to New York and his first solo exhibition there, despite his move to San Francisco. Soon after his arrival in California, Conner received attention from publications nationwide when he exhibited CHILD (1959, pl. 50), a wax figure the color of burned flesh bound to a high chair with nylon stockings, in a group exhibition at the de Young Museum in 1959.[8] Its infamy made Conner—"daredevil of the black wax, wood and silk-stocking set"—an "art star."[9] By 1961 his work had entered the collections of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and the San Francisco Museum of Art

6 Remarkably, Conner also had contact that year with Dorothy Miller, an associate curator at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, who visited him in Wichita. Miller was the organizer of a series of highly influential group exhibitions of young artists, and though she did not include Conner in any of these MoMA surveys, she did scribble a note that recorded where Conner would be in the following years ("Neb, Lincoln till Jan '56 then scholarship to Bklyn Mus. Sch.") along with the comment "21 year old ptr. Good—keep in touch." Object file, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

7 Bruce Conner in Hans Ulrich Obrist and Gunnar B. Kvaran, "Interview: Bruce Conner," *Domus*, no. 885 (Oct. 2005): 21, 22.

8 MoMA attempted to acquire this gruesome commentary on capital punishment, but it proved too controversial for the museum's acquisition committee. It would later enter the collection as a gift of trustee and adventurous art collector Philip Johnson. See Roger Griffith and Megan Randall, "The Life, Death, and Resurrection of Bruce Conner's CHILD," in this volume.

9 A. J. Bloomfield, "Farther Out Than Any Other Gallery," *San Francisco News-Call Bulletin*, Nov. 12, 1960.

(now San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) and had been sold to prominent private collectors across the country. The poet and critic Kenneth Rexroth reported this, remarking with some surprise that he saw Conner's work in the Saint Louis collection of Joseph Pulitzer Jr., hanging with "the Pissarro's and the Gris's."[10] Even New York critic Hilton Kramer noticed the attention that the young Conner was receiving; as early as 1960, the year of Conner's first solo show in New York, Kramer sourly bundled him with two central figures of cutting-edge contemporary art, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, calling all three "visual publicists" set on making their marks in the art world at that moment.[11]

Conner's first solo exhibition in New York opened at the Alan Gallery in January 1960. Consisting of thirty-three "collages and constructions"[12] dating from 1957 through 1959, the show included no paintings but did feature two-dimensional works incorporating found objects, such as WELSH RABBIT (1958), and three-dimensional assemblages, including RATBASTARD, SPIDER LADY (1959, pl. 17), and LADY BRAIN (1960, pl. 14). The exhibition garnered a remarkable amount of attention for a young West Coast artist, and it could not have come at a more opportune moment. New York galleries were filled with found-object art, with shows by Arman, César, John Chamberlain, Yves Klein, Rauschenberg, and Jean Tinguely on view throughout early 1960. In June the Martha Jackson Gallery organized *New Forms—New Media,* a wide-ranging, two-part show that included an international roster of young artists making found-object sculpture, among them George Brecht, Lee Bontecou, and Chamberlain, as well as Conner, who showed SPIDER LADY. Including work by predecessors of this phenomenon, such as Burri, Joseph Cornell, Dubuffet, and Schwitters, *New Forms—New Media* was a direct precursor to William Seitz's influential exhibition *The Art of Assemblage,* which would open at MoMA sixteen months later. In a review of the Martha Jackson show, critic John Canaday called SPIDER LADY "a collage-concoction" with "a garter belt in bad need of psychoanalytic treatment." Despite such waspishness, Canaday ended his review by noting that Conner was one of the "playful goats" in an exhibition filled with work by "parasitic sheep."[13]

Reviews of Conner's solo show at the Alan Gallery earlier in the year had displayed the same mixture of skepticism over the perceived theatrics of his subject matter and artistic language, and appreciation of his imagination and formal sophistication. Artist and critic Sidney Tillim was the most critical. Calling Conner's show "a sampler in the cult of the ugly," he interpreted Conner's bravado as arrogance. Questioning the sincerity of sexually suggestive and frankly fetishistic objects like LADY BRAIN and SPIDER LADY, he ended his review with the punch line of an old joke: "Son, you ain't confessin'," he wrote, "youse braggin'!"[14] Lawrence Campbell expressed exhaustion with what he considered merely a stale repetition of past avant-gardisms.

10 Kenneth Rexroth, "Shockers by a Midwest Artist and Elegance from an English Ballet," *San Francisco Examiner*, Nov. 13, 1960.

11 Hilton Kramer, "Month in Review," *Arts* 33, no. 5 (Feb. 1959): 49.

12 See *Bruce Conner*, exh. brochure (New York: Alan Gallery, 1960).

13 John Canaday, "Art: A Wild, but Curious, End-of-Season Treat," *New York Times*, June 7, 1960.

14 Sidney Tillim, "In the Galleries: Bruce Connor [*sic*]," *Arts* 34, no. 6 (Mar. 1960): 59.

Commenting that Conner had "adopted the technique of the Dadaists and Rauschenberg," he complained that "this exhibition represents the high-speed conversion of avant-garde art into academic expression."[15] Among the few critics to comment on the stylistic and genre-crossing aspect of Conner's assemblages was Kramer, who noticed allusions to painting in Conner's hybridizations of two-dimensional picture and relief, seeing his work as a "curious alliance of nonobjective taste and object-art."[16] These incisive comments notwithstanding, Dore Ashton, art historian and passionate advocate of Abstract Expressionism, was the lone New York critic to endorse Conner's achievements unequivocally. Recognizing Conner's "adherence to the Dada tradition" but discerning innovation in his infusion of urgently contemporary subject matter, she wrote that this historical inspiration "does not prevent his own personality from reading through almost all the amusing to sinister objects he has compiled."[17] Brushing aside those who might criticize Conner for a lack of formal innovation, Ashton argued that the artist's secretive compositional effects, his satirical bent, and his brave disrespect for cross and country brought him "further than any of the other young men exploring the genre."[18]

For all artists working with found objects, Conner included, 1960 was a watershed year. Before the umbrella term "assemblage" was in general usage, this kind of work was commonly labeled "Neo-Dada" or "Junk art." "Neo-Dada," used sometimes with derision, and at other times with an eye toward embedding this new tendency into art history, referred to work that seemed inspired by Duchamp's readymades as well as by surrealist objects. Beginning as the favored description of work by Johns and Rauschenberg, it easily expanded to describe work that not only used but depicted quotidian objects, such as Andy Warhol's silkscreen paintings. Used less in the art world than "Neo-Dada" but more readily understood by the popular press,[19] the phrase "Junk culture" (or alternately, "Junk art") was coined by the British critic and curator Lawrence Alloway.[20] Meant to be simultaneously descriptive and critical, it characterized art that incorporated (as opposed to transformed) trash in both form and content. In a widely read article published in March 1961, and illustrated with photos of work by Conner as well as Arman, Latham, Brecht, and Jim Dine, Alloway described Junk culture as an urban art whose "source is obsolescence, the throwaway material of cities, as it collects in drawers, cupboards, attics, dustbins, gutters, waste lots and city dumps."[21]

"Neo-Dada" and "Junk art" were joined by a third term, which emanated from across the Atlantic. In 1960 the French critic Pierre Restany gathered together a varied group of young European artists who had in common their use of the found object, and called their work "Nouveau Réalisme." The term, anglicized to "New Realism" in the United States, was used interchangeably with "Neo-Dada" and "Junk art" until late 1961, when all three of these

15 Lawrence Campbell, "Bruce Conner," *Art News* 59, no. 1 (Mar. 1960): 62.

16 Kramer, "Month in Review," 50. Kramer, who would later become the chief art critic for the *New York Times*, was the object of a letter-writing campaign by Conner, which the artist designated as a work of art.

17 Dore Ashton, "Art," *Arts and Architecture* 77, no. 3 (Mar. 1960): 11.

18 Ibid.

19 See Art Buchwald, "Where Junk Is Art and Art Is Junk," *Detroit Free Press*, Jan. 30, 1961. Writing from Paris, the popular syndicated humorist clarified that he was referring to "Junk—the stuff you throw away, rather than what some artists smoke." He also quoted the gallerist Iris Clert as saying that her artists were "all crazy" but "today, to be nuts is to be commercial."

20 Alloway also invented the term "Pop" in the mid-1950s to describe the multimedia work of the Independent Group, the circle of artists, architects, and art historians who gathered around the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, of which he was the director from 1954 to 1957.

21 Lawrence Alloway, "Junk Culture," *Architectural Design* 31, no. 3 (Mar. 1961): 122.



2

2 THE LAST SUPPER (1960), installed with paintings by Alberto Burri in the exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1961. Photographic Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

descriptors were subsumed under a more commodious rubric, proposed by Seitz's MoMA exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*. Featuring more than 250 objects by an international array of artists, *The Art of Assemblage* was the first institutional exhibition to offer a comprehensive historical survey of the use of found objects in art of the twentieth century. The show introduced the term "assemblage" as a general rubric under which all found-object art could fall,[22] and offered a broad definition of it that was flexible enough to include the entire history of European Modernism as well as two- and three-dimensional work by some of the most recognized European and American artists of the moment. Seitz's definition of assemblage was all-encompassing and grandiose: described as a method of art making that incorporated all manner of objects, including paper, cloth, bits of metal, and even things such as knives and forks, chairs and tables, parts of dolls and mannequins, and automobile fenders, assemblage operated by twin strategies of accumulation and juxtaposition through which the symbolic quality of objects that made up the world could be uncovered, and in a larger sense, the nature of reality itself could be laid bare.[23] The exhibition included work by modern masters Duchamp, Max Ernst, Kazimir Malevich, Picasso, and Schwitters, as well as that of established midcareer artists Burri, Cornell, Willem de Kooning, Dubuffet, and Motherwell. Younger artists from the United States and Europe were a large cohort and included Bontecou, César, Chamberlain, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Tinguely, among many others. Four artists working on the West Coast also had objects on view: Conner, George Herms, Jess, and Edward Kienholz, as did one self-taught, anonymous artist from Papua New Guinea. Seitz did not organize the exhibition by geography, generation, or affinity group because the point, and also the triumph, of *The Art of Assemblage* was to rationalize enormously disparate kinds of art into a single, international modern art movement. The imprimatur of the Museum of Modern Art gave the show's thesis a definitive aura, cementing the term "assemblage" into the art historical lexicon and bestowing upon the artists included in it a context that would prove difficult for some of them—Conner included—to shake.

22 The term was first used by Jean Dubuffet in 1954 to describe a group of small sculptures he fashioned out of sponge and other found materials. Some of these original assemblages were included in the MoMA show.

23 Press release no. 110, Oct. 4, 1961, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Conner traveled to New York for the opening of *The Art of Assemblage* but famously did not attend the VIP reception. With the help of mail artist Ray Johnson, he opted to stage a situation, placing one of his assemblages (intended to have been included in the show but damaged on its way to New York) directly in the path of incoming guests, causing them to maneuver around it.[24] Kevin Hatch interprets this activity as "highlight[ing] the gulf separating . . . the ephemeral and playful ethos of the Bay Area art scene, from the solemn attitudes and protocols of the East Coast art world."[25] But it also demonstrated Conner's commitment to the creation of durational performances, which had begun during his student years and would continue until the end of his life. This impulse to create activities at the same time that he created assemblages—sometimes using one in the service of the other—was precisely the kind of hybrid form of found object art that MoMA's exhibition ignored and, as a result, served to quash. Conner's action at the exhibition's opening was clearly meant to expose this.

Conner's contributions to *The Art of Assemblage,* along with Johns's and Rauschenberg's, were routinely singled out in national and international press accounts of the show. Their works were described as deriving from Dada and Surrealism, the latter coupled with the term "literary" and used with faint disgust by critics who continued to be diehard supporters of nonobjectivity.[26] In the exhibition, Seitz chose not to place Conner's work proximate to the two other "Neo-Dadaists"; his table sculpture THE LAST SUPPER (1960) was placed in juxtaposition with black melted-plastic paintings by Burri (see fig. 2), and his large assemblage THE TEMPTATION OF ST. BARNEY GOOGLE (1959, pl. 28) was in sight of wall assemblages by Niki de Saint Phalle and Norwegian artist Rolf Nesch. In the catalogue, THE LAST SUPPER was pictured in the section entitled "The Realism and Poetry of Assemblage," which, however briefly, mentions the advent of Nouveau Réalisme.

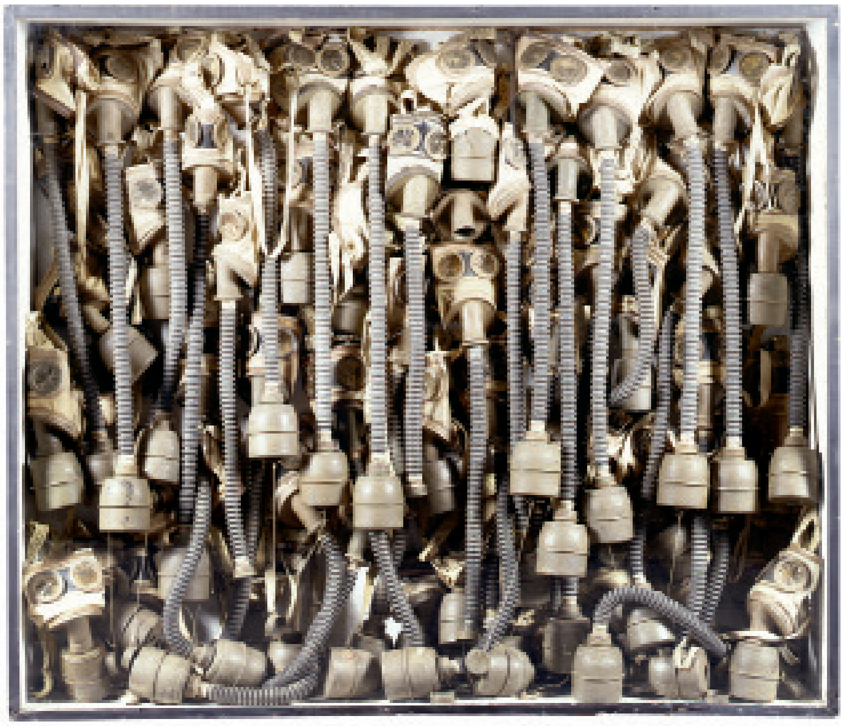
That Seitz opted to hang Conner's work within the context of European artists reflects the fact that in this period of Conner's career, his assemblages began to be assessed as relatable to contemporary European forms of found-object sculpture. Between the opening of *The Art of Assemblage,* at the end of 1961, and 1965, when Conner stopped making assemblages, his work was often put in the context of the Nouveaux Réalistes. Roughly contemporary with Conner, the Nouveaux Réalistes included the sculptors Arman, César, Daniel Spoerri, and Tinguely; the so-called *décollage/affichiste* artist/poets Jacques de La Villeglé, François Dufrêne, and Raymond Hains; the Roman *afficheur* Mimmo Rotella; Saint Phalle and Martial Raysse; and finally Yves Klein. Their first exhibition together, organized by Restany at Galerie J in Paris in 1961, was called *À 40⁰ au-dessus de Dada.*[27] As the name of the exhibition implies, the Nouveaux Réalistes were inspired by Dada and Surrealism's use of found objects, but they updated this approach by using mass-manufactured objects in their sculptures, reliefs, and paintings.

24 See Rachel Federman, "Bruce Conner: Fifty Years in Show Business—A Narrative Chronology," in this volume.

25 Kevin Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 33.

26 See, for example, Kramer, "Month in Review," 50.

27 Seitz traveled to Paris to see *À 40⁰ au-dessus de Dada.* Restany recalled that during his stay the two of them "discovered the convergence of our opinions" on the international nature of assemblage. Pierre Restany, "Chelsea 1960," in *Paris–New York: 1908–1968*, ed. Pontus Hultén (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Modern, 1977), 148 (author's translation). In the end, Seitz included work by Arman, César, Dufrêne, Hains, Saint Phalle, Raysse, and Tinguely in *The Art of Assemblage*, along with Baj. In the catalogue, he quoted Restany's definition of the group as artists who offered "an entire aspect of the real, capture[d] in its objective integrity," yet he did not recognize Nouveau Réalisme as a movement unto itself in the exhibition; its artists were subsumed within his larger story of a continuous history of assembled art in the twentieth century, and their works were dispersed throughout the show. See William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), 82–84.



3

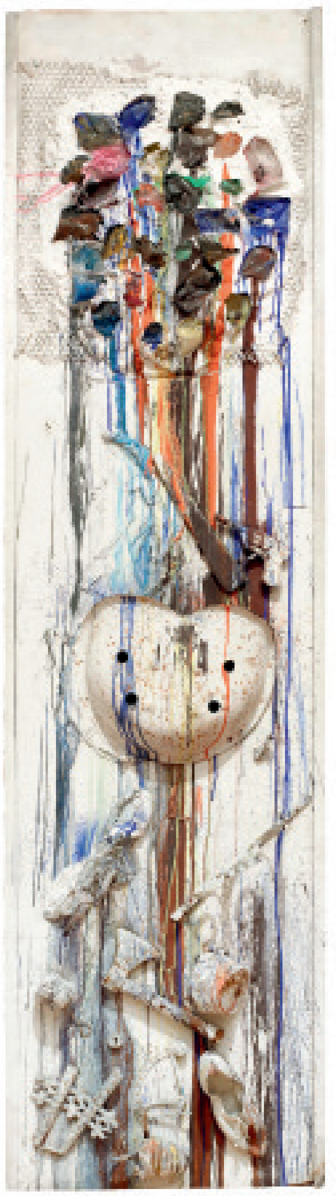
3 Arman, *Home Sweet Home II*, 1960. Accumulation of gas masks in wood box, 51 ⅛ × 59 × 9 ⅞ in. (130 × 150 × 25 cm). Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland

Foregoing the dadaist fascination with chance encounters, they preferred calculated rather than fortuitous juxtapositions, using strategies of multiplication and repetition or creating situations that determined compositions to look critically at contemporary culture. Arman's accumulation of gas masks neatly arranged in a Plexiglas box, ironically titled *Home Sweet Home II* (1960, fig. 3), or Saint Phalle's shooting paintings (1961–63, see fig. 4), which seem to bleed pigment, share a similar sense of engagement with contemporary issues with work by Conner from the same period like CHILD, which could be read as a child in an electric chair, and BLACK DAHLIA (1960, pl. 48), an assemblage portrait of a victim of an infamous sex murder. This kind of subject matter, dark and trenchant but shaded with sardonic humor and existential sadness, seems at home with work like Burri's burnt abstractions or Saint Phalle's violated paintings. As both Seitz and Restany recognized, Conner's assemblages were clearly more in tune with postwar European art at the beginning of the 1960s than the generally perkier kind of work emanating from a New York art world on the brink of the explosion of Pop.

Although *À 40⁰ au-dessus de Dada* did not include Conner's assemblages, Restany included them in subsequent exhibitions and discussions of the movement that was his brainchild.[28] He recognized differences between American and European artists working in assemblage—especially those who would imminently be labeled Pop artists—but he also saw a common critical take on rampant industrial production, ubiquitous advertising, and urbanism that made them all, in his eyes, practitioners of a kind of "urban folklore."[29] He used these perceived connections to offer Nouveau Réalisme as a bridge over the wide gap between Paris and New York, caused by what he characterized as a "cold war" between "art economies." Nouveaux Réalistes, Restany proclaimed retrospectively, were "the artisans of culture

28 Conner participated in a number of the most significant group exhibitions of Nouveau Réalisme in institutions across Western Europe. The 1963 Biennale di San Marino in Italy, with a thematic focus on "tendencies that are notably European," included assemblages by Conner in a section titled "Nouveau Réalisme," and in 1964–65 the Gemeentemuseum in the Hague organized a substantial group exhibition called *New Realism*, which also included work by Conner. The Dutch show traveled to the Museum of the Twentieth Century in Vienna under a new name, *Pop, etc.*, and subsequently to the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, where it was called *New Realism and Pop Art*. In these iterations, Conner's assemblages were grouped under the broad category of "Reality as Found Object," a section that included European Nouveaux Réalistes, as well as Cornell, Duchamp, and Man Ray. See Henry Meyric Hughes, "Pierre Restany, l'AICA et l'aventure est-européenne," in *Le demi-siècle de Pierre Restany*, ed. Richard Leeman (Paris: Éditions de Cendres, INHA, 2009).

29 Pierre Restany, *60/90: Trente ans de Nouveau Réalisme* (Paris: La Différence, 1990), 11–12.



4

4 Niki de Saint Phalle, *Shooting Painting American Embassy*, 1961. Paint, plaster, wood, plastic bags, shoe, twine, metal seat, ax, metal can, toy gun, wire mesh, shot pellets, and other objects on wood, 96 3/8 × 25 7/8 × 8 5/8 in. (244.8 × 65.7 × 21.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of the Niki Charitable Art Foundation

convergence,"[30] pointing out that Chamberlain, Conner, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Richard Stankiewicz all were in dialogue with artists from the Paris-based movement from its beginning.[31] Restany's sentiment was echoed by Tinguely during his visit to New York in early 1960. The critical mass of found-object art exhibited at that time excited him, as he saw a connection in the American artists' work to the new sensibility developing simultaneously in Europe. "This discovery of American grandeur . . . is a communal experience with all young European artists at the beginning of the sixties,"[32] he wrote excitedly to Restany at the time.

Of the many interviews with Conner over the course of his career, very few mention his opinion on works by artists outside his close circle of friends in San Francisco at the end of the 1950s.[33] Wary of being defined by any one material, style, or tendency, Conner did not mention the moment in his career when his work and that of the Nouveaux Réalistes converged. Conner would not have been unsympathetic, however, to Restany's description of Nouveau Réalisme as "urban folklore," as he had described his own assemblages as "a folk art form."[34] He was

30 Ibid., 18–19.

31 All of these artists, with the exception of Conner, would have solo exhibitions in galleries at the center of the Parisian avant-garde by 1964: Johns exhibited at the Galerie Rive Droite in 1959 and again in 1961; Stankiewicz, at Galerie Neufville in 1960 and Daniel Cordier in 1964; Rauschenberg at Daniel Cordier in 1961 and Galerie Ileana Sonnabend in 1963; and Chamberlain at Galerie Ileana Sonnabend in 1964.

32 Letter from Jean Tinguely to Pierre Restany, quoted in Restany, *60/90*, 21.

33 Notably, he does mention seeing Rauschenberg's Combines for the first time in 1960, commenting that this confirmed that they were doing very different things. See Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Paul Karlstrom and Serge Guilbaut, Mar. 29, 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

34 Conner quoted in Richard Cándida Smith, *The Modern Moves West: California Artists and Democratic Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 141.

also keenly interested in assemblages created outside an art context, and when Seitz made a research visit in 1960, he took him to both artists' studios and store-window displays.[35] Some of Conner's works even seem inspired by found forms of assemblage. Hanging, sack-like sculptures such as RATBASTARD or BLACK DAHLIA resemble spell or charm pouches common to esoteric ritual; and works made in Mexico, where Conner lived briefly in 1961–62, were inspired by the makeshift altars found in homes and public places all over that country. LA VIRGEN (1962) even incorporates a *milagro,* a religious charm used as a votive offering on altars, on a surface that also includes rosary-like beads.

At the end of 1962, Restany worked with New York's Sidney Janis Gallery as an advisor for *The New Realists,* a show that attempted to broaden the European group to include Americans as well. The show featured work by Nouveaux Réalistes Arman, Hains, Klein, Raysse, Rotella, Spoerri, and Tinguely, in addition to European artists in the group's orbit like Baj and Christo, but from there it charted a new path. Eschewing what Janis identified as "poetic" or "expressionistic" work, as well as "the important directions of Collage and Assemblage,"[36] the exhibition did not include work by Rauschenberg, Johns, or Conner. It did, however, include work by Robert Indiana, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, and Warhol, all of whom, by late 1962, were considered the main banner carriers of the newly named Pop art.[37] Janis saw European artists like Arman and Spoerri as akin to Pop artists in their interest in mass-produced objects; Restany did not. Feeling that the "logical interlocutors" with Nouveau Réalisme were Chamberlain, Conner, Johns, Kienholz, and Rauschenberg, Restany questioned the motives behind the excision of these artists, emphasizing in particular what he called "certain California absences."[38] Janis defended his decision not to include Conner in the show in his introduction to the catalogue, writing that his work, along with that of César, Marisol, Louise Nevelson, and Stankiewicz, was too much a part of "Collage and Assemblage" to be included with artists like Warhol. Their shared interest in found objects notwithstanding, with this exhibition Janis drew a line between those artists working with assemblage and Pop artists. In retrospect, Restany conceded to this distinction. From a distance of fifteen years, he saw *The Art of Assemblage* as less an introduction to assemblage than a conclusive summary that cleared the decks for Pop, a movement he characterized as "an American vision of the world"[39] in opposition to Nouveau Réalisme's "singularly European response to the same world situation."[40]

Upon its introduction in 1962, Pop at first was seen as another iteration of Neo-Dada, and Conner's work, like that of Johns and Rauschenberg, was mentioned in conjunction with it, particularly in Europe, where critics saw all American art as somehow related to American mass culture.[41] Conner, however, was after something quite different from Pop's exuberant

35 See Federman, "Bruce Conner: Fifty Years in Show Business," and Kellie Jones, "Local/Tour: Some Thoughts on Assemblage," in this volume. Conner also told an interviewer for *Rolling Stone* that he "really wanted to have my first show someplace like a filling station, but there weren't any hip filling stations around." Conner quoted in Thomas Albright, "Meet Bruce Conner, Film-Maker," *Rolling Stone*, Mar. 9, 1968, 18.

36 Sidney Janis, "On the Theme of the Exhibition," in *The New Realists*, exh. cat. (New York: Sidney Janis Gallery, 1962), n.p.

37 The Sidney Janis Gallery would go on to represent a large number of New York Pop artists, including Dine, Oldenburg, George Segal, Tom Wesselmann, and others.

38 Restany, *60/90*, 45–46. In another retrospective account of the show, Restany implied a New York–centric bias on Janis's part, complaining that the excision of Conner and Keinholz "contributed to a disequilibrium" in the show. Restany, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes: Un manifeste de la nouvelle peinture* (Paris: Éditions Planète, 1968), 186.

39 Restany, *60/90*, 34.

40 Restany, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 189.

41 This might have been due to Conner's filmic oeuvre. Film itself is a mass medium, and Conner's use of found footage accompanied by soundtracks featuring songs by the Beatles or Ray Charles made the connection an obvious one. In a 1964 article in the *New York Times*, Brian O'Doherty characterized COSMIC RAY (1961, p. 51) as "a Pop Art masterpiece," and Kevin Hatch, writing several decades later, agreed with his characterization of Conner's films as Pop art. See O'Doherty, "Conner and His Films: The Artist as Director, Performer, and—Occasionally—as Artist," *New York Times*, Apr. 26, 1964; and Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner*, 117.

celebration of mass production. As the West Coast critic and founding editor of *Artforum* magazine Philip Leider observed, Conner's assemblages focused on the discarded object, not the bright new one fresh from the store.[42] Further, though his sexually explicit subject matter—pinups, strippers, and starlets—and frequent use of lingerie and underwear as material certainly encouraged a certain kind of objectification, if not consumption, his critical focus on large metaphysical subjects like world annihilation and human exploitation stood in contradistinction to Pop's insouciant focus on the quotidian, as much as his soiled and broken objects did to Pop's depictions of slick and shiny products. In the years 1962 to 1964, Conner's handmade assemblages began to look increasingly nostalgic and old-fashioned in the context of Pop-crazed New York. Conner had already sensed that the field of assemblage was getting crowded, but it was precisely at this time that interest in his assemblages intensified, particularly in Europe.[43]

At the end of 1964, a few months after a ten-year retrospective of his assemblages, drawings, and films closed at the Alan Gallery, Conner had a solo show of assemblages at the Robert Fraser Gallery, the most happening gallery in London at that moment. Fraser, an upper-crust sybarite who had spent time in Los Angeles and New York before opening his gallery in 1962, represented an eclectic group of artists that included British Pop figures Peter Blake, Richard Hamilton, and Eduardo Paolozzi; optical abstractionist Bridget Riley; and American Pop artists Dine, Ed Ruscha, and Warhol.[44] Conner's reception from the mainstream London art press was lukewarm, with critics stressing the qualities of the work that they saw as particularly American, although of an earlier vintage than Pop. "Again Mr. Conner's work furthers the Abstract Expressionist reaction against the European centralization of the image," wrote the critic in the London *Times*.[45] Most reviews mentioned Dada as the overriding influence, as well as the work of Rauschenberg, whose profile in Europe was high after the Golden Lion had been awarded to him at the Venice Biennale that summer. *Domus,* the influential Milan-based art magazine, noted Conner's reliance on Surrealism, Dada, and Constructivism but saw it as covered with a veneer of "playboy smartness" that could only emanate from "a young and very successful American 'assembler.'"[46] The exhibition attracted the attention of cultural movers and shakers in London, including members of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, but Fraser was unable to sell even one of Conner's works. The show traveled intact to Paris, to Galerie J, the birthplace of Nouveau Réalisme, owned by Jeannine de Goldschmidt-Rothschild, who was the companion of Restany. Contextualization with the Nouveaux Réalistes proved more fruitful than the Pop milieu of the London show, and as Conner revealed in an interview in 1974, his Paris exhibition was his most successful show to date in terms of sales. According to the artist, Goldschmidt-Rothschild sold thirteen works, to a variety of well-known European collectors, and it was through this exhibition that Conner's work began to become known to a wider cultural public in Western Europe.[47]

42 Philip Leider, "Bruce Conner: A New Sensibility," *Artforum* 1, no. 6 (Nov.–Dec. 1962): 18.

43 In 1964–65 Conner had exhibitions at Galerie George Lester in Rome, Robert Fraser Gallery in London, and Galerie J in Paris.

44 Having spent time in Los Angeles as a young art dealer, Fraser had an interest in West Coast artists that was unique for that moment, and he periodically exhibited California artists at his gallery. In 1966 he even organized a group show of Californians, including Wallace Berman, Conner, Llyn Foulkes, Jess, Ken Price, and Ruscha.

45 "Art of Bits and Pieces," *The Times* (London), Dec. 16, 1964: 7.

46 J. Rykwert, "Mostre a Londra," *Domus*, no. 423 (Feb. 1965): 278.

47 The London gallerist Anthony Meier recalls that the Cologne-based critic and curator Kasper König was introduced to Conner's work at Galerie J. Interview with the author, Oct. 15, 2014, London.

The shows at Robert Fraser and Galerie J, with their groovy, adoring crowds, arguably represented the pinnacle of Conner's international fame. Significantly, upon his return to the United States from London, he "decided not to glue the world down anymore"[48] and stopped making assemblages. Conner's choice can be interpreted in part as a result of his dislike for his growing recognition by what he scornfully referred to throughout his life as "the art bizness."[49] His discomfort with the success of his sculptures was compounded, though, by his worry that he would forever be pigeonholed as a maker of assemblages. In 1965 he wrote to Michael McClure that he had "a feeling of death from the 'recognition' I have been receiving . . . I feel like I am being catalogued and filed away."[50] This fear of categorization was also certainly part of his decision to stop making assemblages; yet another reason, heretofore unexamined in the literature surrounding his work, is that he recognized that the contemporary art discourse was turning away from assemblage and the found object—and he wanted to turn with it. Speaking about assemblage to a *Rolling Stone* interviewer in 1968, Conner commented, "For a long time I had the field to myself; I could move out in any direction. Then everyone began to stake out territory."[51] Barely four years after its establishment in postwar art history, assemblage had become overexposed and passé—everywhere, except perhaps on the West Coast.[52]

In 1964 Conner wrote to McClure about his work, "I may be moving towards emptiness. More light and space and sound—less dead things."[53] In fact, it was at this moment that Conner began to consciously move his oeuvre in the direction of a more conceptual kind of art. He created the thirteen-canvas installation TOUCH/DO NOT TOUCH in 1964, ran for San Francisco supervisor as a work of performance art in 1967, and that same year collaborated with a group of artists and technicians at San Francisco's Avalon Ballroom to create light shows that were visual complements to rock concerts. This period of work on multimedia light shows has been interpreted as a moment when Conner stepped back from making art, but it can also be seen as a tactical pivot away from object-oriented art toward time-based art making. Conner observed at the time that his interest in light shows derived from his desire to create a hybrid of the visual art and filmic experience.[54] He wrote to Charles Alan, perhaps proudly, "I am involved in public spectacle with visuals like movies, demonstrations, TV Video tape, painting elephants, showing at museums, light shows, etc."[55] Conner's drawing practice at the time can similarly be seen as an experiment in the merging of visual and time-based artistic mediums. Some have argued that his post-assemblage drawings pulled him away from the contemporary art discourse,[56] but his process, even more than his results, indicates not only a knowledge of the most contemporary artistic developments in New York and elsewhere, but also a desire to experiment with its new languages and techniques. Conner would sometimes work on a felt-tip pen drawing for ten hours a day,[57] and such durational performativity links this process not only to his earlier performance work, but

48 Conner in "A Conversation with Bruce Conner and Robert Dean," n.p.

49 During his first forays into the New York commercial art world at the Alan Gallery in 1956 and 1958, Conner had refused to sign his assemblages, making it difficult for Alan to sell them. "I viewed signing my work as a form of advertising, like a flashing Coca-Cola sign," he explained. Bruce Conner in Michael Kohn, "An Interview with Bruce Conner," in *Bruce Conner: Inkblot Drawings and Engraving Collages* (Los Angeles. Kohn Turner Gallery, 1997), n.p.

50 Letter from Bruce Conner to Michael McClure, Oct. 22, 1965, Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

51 Conner quoted in Albright, "Meet Bruce Conner, Film-Maker," 18.

52 Aided and abetted by *Artforum* magazine, published out of San Francisco from 1962 to 1965 and subsequently in Los Angeles until 1967, assemblage began to gel into a kind of School of the West Coast just as it was receding from center stage in the East. See "California Sculpture Today," special issue, *Artforum* 2, no. 2 (Aug. 1963), as well as exhibitions like *Assemblage in California: Work from the Late 50's and Early 60's*, organized by John Coplans for the Art Gallery, University of California, Irvine, in 1968.

53 Conner quoted in Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner*, 108.

54 Ibid., 175–76.

55 Letter from Bruce Conner to Charles Alan, June 5, 1967, Alan Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

56 See, for example, Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner*, 196.

57 Ibid., 226.

also to the obsessive painting practice of an artist like Yayoi Kusama and the activity-centered drawing experiments of Barry Le Va, Robert Morris, and Richard Serra.[58]

"I always sort of felt that what I was doing was outside the art scene anyway," Conner said in his 1968 *Rolling Stone* interview, speaking of his career in general. "To rationalize it socially, you have to call it art."[59] That same year, after more than a decade of representation, Conner left the Alan Gallery and had all of his work still in its inventory sent to him in San Francisco. With this gesture, as art historian Anastasia Aukeman has noted, Conner seems to have been "woodshedding," a term used by jazz musicians to describe temporarily ceasing to perform in public when they feel that their music has become predictable.[60] Conner never meant to disappear completely, however, just to change his context. For the rest of his life, he continued to exhibit his work regularly in the San Francisco area, and his films remained in circulation. He had solo exhibitions sporadically at various galleries in Los Angeles and New York, and in 1999, a retrospective of Conner's oeuvre—including his assemblages—opened at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, later traveling to Fort Worth, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. It did not find venues in New York or in Europe.

Writer Rebecca Solnit has argued that if Conner had continued to exhibit in New York, "it is conceivable that undergraduate art history texts would now speak of Johns, Rauschenberg, and Conner."[61] By deliberately ceasing to make the assemblages that allowed him to participate for a time in a clutch of tendencies that defined contemporary art in New York and across Europe during the first half of the 1960s, Conner risked temporary obscurity for what he saw as artistic freedom. His move toward performative and hybrid forms of art making can be seen in retrospect as a recognition of the changing discourse in contemporary art, but also as part of a lifelong struggle against being defined by technique, tendency, medium, or—significantly—reception. "I've considered [that] the concept of a person being one person, a solitary unchanging personality, is a fiction," Conner confided in a 1997 interview. "People are many different people when circumstances change, the environment changes, people around them change."[62] This recognition of the fluidity of the contexts that surrounded his work inspired Conner from the earliest moments of his artistic career to combat all manner of classification, whether or not it came with recognition. For Conner, it was not enough simply to be the first among equals, a goal that he achieved in the earliest days of his career. From the beginning, his aim was to be incomparable.

58 Hatch makes this connection between the durational drawing of Conner and the process work of these artists but notes that his drawings were largely considered "foreign exotica, akin to curiosities from some far-off corner of the natural world." Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner*, 226–27, 244.

59 Albright, "Meet Bruce Conner, Film-Maker," 18.

60 See Anastasia Aukeman, *Welcome to Painterland: Bruce Conner and the Rat Bastard Protective Association* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

61 Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990), 60.

62 Conner in Kohn, "An Interview with Bruce Conner," n.p.



Kellie Jones

LOCAL/TOUR: SOME THOUGHTS ON ASSEMBLAGE

When Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque "invented" assemblage and collage in 1912, these ways of making art had already been around for hundreds of years. Asian traditions with pasted paper dating back more than a millennium, the creation of Valentine's Day cards by European nuns in the 1700s, early photomontages by Lewis Carroll in the nineteenth century, and amateur and folk art traditions in the United States are evidence of the way people had used mixed-media techniques over time.

The adoption, incorporation, and interpolation of what the art critic Harold Rosenberg called this "way of making" into high art paralleled Western Modernism's taste for non-Western, functional, and folk art forms. The use of found materials injected anecdotal and democratic qualities into the fine art object. Underlying the practice, however, was the belief that intellectual ownership did not pertain to the non-Western, the nonmale, or the untrained; these were not "proper" authors and thus their creations lived in the public domain. There was a sense that the "real" Western (usually white male) genius could transform these underutilized raw materials of creativity into something sublime.

Drawing on common and even shoddy materials put artists in an off-balance space of experimentation. As Picasso commented, "We sought to express reality with materials that we did not know how to handle and which we prized precisely because we knew that their help was not indispensable to us, and that they were neither the best nor the most adequate."[1]

In California assemblage of the 1950s, the use of scavenged, found, and crude materials became a way of transforming art making and challenging, in the writer Rebecca Solnit's words, "conventional ideas of workmanship, originality, value, and purity."[2] This practice redefined aesthetics as conditional rather than absolute, valuing the multiple possibilities of structure, narratives with overlapping and competing outcomes, and varied notions of what

1 Pablo Picasso quoted in Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 45.

2 Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990), ix.

SPIDER LADY HOUSE, 1959 (pl. 16, detail)

constitutes content and story. Things ruined and retrieved, random and accidental, became key partners in authorship.

Adopting found and discarded materials also could be translated as the embrace of those who inhabited society's margins. Black Americans fit this bill in the post–World War II era and during the rise of the civil rights movement in the 1950s. Black bebop, hard bop, and jazz generally became the soundtrack of alternative aesthetics and visions for America's future. While not specifically in dialogue with the black visual arts of this time, many of the period's white artists and cultural figures—including, on the West Coast, curator Walter Hopps and the artists Edward Kienholz and Bruce Conner—were not totally estranged from African American culture.

Conner's thoughts on societal alienation are one way to think about the conversation—at times sublimated—with the black modern. The artists and poets of his Rat Bastard Protective Association were "people who were making things with the detritus of society, who themselves were ostracized or alienated from full involvement with the society."[3] He was inspired by the local garbage collection agency, the Scavenger's Protective Association, imbricating both low-status workers and the very elements he used to make art.

Inspiration flowed from the San Francisco that Conner and his friends inhabited—the mixed neighborhoods of the Fillmore and Haight-Ashbury but particularly the Western Addition, a black enclave that had been ravaged by urban renewal and left like so many others to decay before being summarily destroyed. Conner and George Herms frequented the area to procure the refuse of such demolition for their art.

When the curator William Seitz visited the West Coast while organizing the exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* for the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1961), Conner was Seitz's Bay Area tour guide. As Solnit articulates: "The point of Conner's tour was that assemblage was not a new high art form, but one that had a centuries-long tradition. ('Assemblage is a new medium,' Seitz wrote anyway.) Conner took him to see an old black man whose junk store on McAllister Street was full of arrangements he'd found impressive, and to a Chinese laundry in North Beach with interestingly arranged accretions in its windows."[4]

In the exhibition's catalogue, Seitz noted that some of the finest assemblage works were from "primitives and folk artists." The visual value of decrepit urban landscapes or slums was part of the aesthetic, evoking notions of dislocation and the ruin. According to Seitz, the very "confrontation of democratic platitudes with the Negro's disenfranchisement" had contributed

3 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Peter Boswell, June 15, 1983; quoted in Peter Boswell, "Bruce Conner: Theater of Light and Shadow," in *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II*, exh. cat., ed. Boswell, Bruce Jenkins, and Joan Rothfuss (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 41.

4 Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 83.



1 Left: Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.*, 1975–77. Nylon, sand, and mixed media; dimensions variable. Right: Senga Nengudi, *Performance Piece*, 1978. Gelatin silver prints; left: 40 × 31 ½ in. (101.6 × 80 cm); right, each: 31 ½ × 40 in. (80 × 101.6 cm). Both works courtesy the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. Installation view of *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2015

to the eruption of assemblage.[5] In this narrative, as well as those of others, African Americans formed the interstices, the psychological and material unconscious of the city.

Solnit sees Conner's work as heavily invested in a questioning of militarism and human exploitation, in which women's bodies are used to signal such ravaging and degradation. Describing the birth of RATBASTARD (1958, pl. 10), Conner recalled slashing a canvas and then stuffing it with discards.[6] Adding a strap made the work a purse but also allowed him to transport and hang it anywhere, a refutation of the gallery system. Wrapping it with nylon stockings gave it a layered, textured, and veiled surface, a haunted affect. This technique, continued in his assemblages, also signaled a protofeminist and queer critique. It evoked an excessiveness to discursive norms that E. Patrick Johnson calls "quare" in its intersection of race and queer theory. Such "queer desire" for meaning is (re)built using "whatever heuristic is at hand: conjecture, fantasy, overreading, revision."[7] Conner's image of the female body, albeit in objectified form, eventually leads to what Rebecca Schneider has called feminism's "explicit body," which intercedes into fantasy constructs as "a ribald refusal to vanish" and whose factualness "collapse[s] symbolic space."[8]

Conner's torn and scarred nylon hose is in conversation with Senga Nengudi's manipulation of such fabric, though hers privileges suppleness and flexibility, signaling the performative but also promise (see fig. 1). Like other African American artists in the post–World War II period, Nengudi used found objects at times to critique, but more often she constructed them as paeans to survival. Neighborhoods in distress, junk shops, and vernacular installations, these were the very same things that inspired black artists such as Noah Purifoy, John Outterbridge, and Betye Saar. Even David Hammons was called a "hip junk dealer."[9] Yet the challenge for African American artists was to be seen as modern, as contributing to contemporary art discourse rather than simply supplying its fuel. Like these artists', Conner's sources were local but suggested a wider understanding of "the modern," indeed its global logics. Like theirs, too, his work offered an exit from modernist purities both materially and intellectually.

5 William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1961), 72, 89.

6 Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 61.

7 Elizabeth Freeman, introduction, in "Queer Temporalities," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, nos. 2–3 (2007): 162. See also E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (Jan. 2001): 1–25.

8 Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 6.

9 Calvin Reid, "Chasing the Blue Train," *Art in America* 77, no. 9 (Sept. 1989): 196–97.

Michelle Barger

ALTERED PROCESS

One of the purposes of my work has been to try to change the way in which people relate to artists, how museums deal with the art work; to alter the process. I have not been successful. But the process of trying repeatedly, over a long period of time, has become a part of the work.

—Bruce Conner

For a short period in 1957, soon after he arrived in the city, Bruce Conner worked at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [SFMOMA]) preparing and installing works for exhibitions and helping to maintain the building.[1] This was shortly before he began his body of assemblage and collage work, in which he pierced, stretched, scratched, and melted found detritus into precarious compositions, often held together by tension. By 1964, the museum had acquired three works from this early period, including DARK BROWN (1959, pl. 43), a canvas transformed into a low relief of pooled paint, gooey varnish, entrapped jewelry, and metallic paint, bordered by a furry collar. Concerned about the still tacky and tempting surface, conscientious museum caretakers placed a "Do not touch" label on the adjacent wall, unknowingly setting off an antagonistic relationship with the artist—one that would repeatedly push the institution to reconsider ingrained notions of what it means to be a museum.[2]

In the 1970s six more works by Conner entered SFMOMA's collection, including his last and most ambitious assemblage, LOOKING GLASS (1964, pl. 27). Also during this decade, in 1972, the museum launched its conservation department, one of the first of its kind on the West Coast and one of only a few in the United States dedicated to the conservation of modern and contemporary art.[3] Tony Rockwell and recent graduates of the Cooperstown Graduate Program in the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, in Cooperstown, New York, formed the first group of conservators. Training programs at the time focused on treatment of traditional artworks, offering minimal skills for conservators in the care of works made by living artists with unorthodox materials and methods. Inge-Lise Eckmann Lane, one of the

Epigraph: Bruce Conner, "Talking With Bruce Conner: Vision and Motion," *West* (Spring 1996): 8.

1 Jean Conner, in conversation with Robert Conway, Dec. 2015. The San Francisco Museum of Art became the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1976.

2 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Paul Karlstrom, Aug. 12, 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Conner's contentious interaction with the museum following his discovery of the label led to the creation of TOUCH/DO NOT TOUCH (1964, pl. 83 and p. 90). See Rachel Federman, "Bruce Conner: Fifty Years in Show Business—A Narrative Chronology," in this volume.

3 Trustee Elise S. Haas worked closely with Caroline Keck, director of the Cooperstown Graduate Program in the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Work, in establishing the department, which was designed to be self-supporting and income-generating through treatment of work in private holdings and neighboring museums. Tony Rockwell was the founding and chief conservator, and was joined soon after by conservation fellows Inge-Lise Eckmann (now Inge-Lise Eckmann Lane) and James Bernstein, who later became the museum's codirectors of conservation.



1



2

1–2 AFTER PEYOTE, 1959–60 (pl. 15, details)

department's first conservators, recalls of this experimental period: "We were an island; there were not many colleagues with whom we could collaborate easily. . . . We were trying to appropriate traditional techniques and adapt them to our unique needs."[4]

Shortly after the department was established, Conner's AFTER PEYOTE (1959–60, pl. 15) was given to the museum and brought to the conservation studio for condition assessment. Conner created this assemblage by stuffing a single nylon stocking with costume jewelry, feathers, filmstrips, an eyelash curler, buttons, mirrored glass, and the cover of a hardback book (see figs. 1–2).[5] The laden stocking—cinched at the top with string—hangs from a nail, drooping with the weight of its contents. Conner employed his characteristic running of the nylon, resulting in a network of trellised gaps in the sheer material. This deliberate feature in the stocking was interpreted in the conservation condition report as a problem: "The stocking has developed many vertical runs, punctures, and a tear across the top." The proposed treatment was to "join the tears and punctures in the stocking with a transparent adhesive."[6]

In the 1970s it was far from common practice to involve artists in the care of their work, and in fact training programs discouraged it.[7] However, SFMOMA was at the forefront of contemporary art conservation, and Conner came to the studio in advance of the treatment of AFTER PEYOTE to review the condition and talk through approaches with the conservator. He indicated that the position of the elements within the stocking was variable as they

4 Inge-Lise Eckmann Lane, telephone conversation with the author, Oct. 2, 2015.

5 The cover is from *The Table Book of Art: A History of Art in All Countries and Ages* by P. T. Sandhurst (Philadelphia: P. W. Ziegler & Co., 1878). The book had been owned by Isabella Peabody, who had signed the inside cover in ink.

6 Unattributed condition report, May 25, 1973, San Francisco Museum of Art Conservation Department.

7 Eckmann Lane, telephone conversation with the author, Oct. 2, 2015; and Tony Rockwell, telephone conversation with the author, Oct. 5, 2015.



3

3 AFTER PEYOTE, 1959–60 (pl. 15); detail of repaired nylon

were not held permanently in place. He also explained that he had made the holes in the nylon intentionally. Although progressive in nature, the visit was not completely successful in the eyes of the artist: the conservator proceeded to add an incongruent patch of elastic pantyhose over holes in the nylon stocking (fig. 3). The artist reflected on this experience later, stating, "I thought it was very curious that this became a piece [where the] conservator's aesthetic concepts were moving way over my own."[8]

8 Bruce Conner in "Conversation in the 4th Floor Galleries with Bruce Conner, J. W. Shank, Carol Rosset, and Graham Beal," transcript, Aug. 15, 1986, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Archives, 6.

This kind of unsatisfying experience was familiar to Conner. The artist was known to doggedly track the display and condition of his work in museums—in particular his assemblages—and to chastise directors, curators, and conservators with typed, single-spaced letters when he found elements misaligned in a composition, an accompanying label he considered misleading, or the wrong material used in the display furniture.

Conner brought this same level of tenacity to his advocacy for the treatment of *The Rose* (1958–66) by his dear friend and contemporary Jay DeFeo. In 1973, under the direction of Rockwell, conservators from the San Francisco Museum of Art initiated a project to stabilize the massive construct, then installed in a conference room at the San Francisco Art Institute and in danger of sliding off its support. Following the initial study of the work, persistent phone calls and correspondence by Conner urged the museum to move the complex project forward, ultimately resulting in a meeting between Conner, Rockwell, and the museum's director, Henry Hopkins, in 1974. This may not seem especially noteworthy, yet it is the only time that a meeting with an artist was included in the conservation department's monthly reports from 1973 to 1975.

Perhaps it was the cumulative effect of these moments over the years that later compelled the museum to push beyond the boundaries of normal practice. In 1986 the museum had just opened *Seven Artists in Depth: The Creative Process,* curated by Hopkins, which highlighted works from the collection by artists having an affinity with the West Coast. Thirteen works

by Bruce Conner were included, among them assemblages, works on paper, and photographs. A few weeks after the opening, on a day the museum was closed to the public, conservator Will Shank, curator Graham Beal, and registrar Carol Rosset met with Conner in the galleries. With a tape recorder along, they accompanied Conner to each of his works in the exhibition, listening and responding as he shared the concepts behind them, the ways he had manipulated materials to achieve the end result, and his ideas for making the display better. As Shank noted in retrospect, this was a highly unusual practice for the museum at the time; he had no recollection of undertaking this collaborative activity with any other artist.[9]

In the following decades, interdepartmental teams at SFMOMA conducted multiple interviews with Conner about his work, and staff members continued to develop new models for integrating the artist's voice into museum practice.[10] Ever true to his contrarian nature, Conner never stopped contesting the accepted protocol, refusing to be seen within the frame of the camera and redirecting conversations to avoid answering questions. More than fifty-one years since Conner secured a work to the wall for display (or swept a gallery before an opening), the museum has affirmed his place in our institutional history through repeated accessions. The greater legacy, however, may be the way in which Conner, always the provocateur, shaped us as an institution beyond our gallery walls.

9 J. William Shank, telephone conversation with the author, Aug. 26, 2015.

10 In 1994 the Interactive Educational Technologies program was launched at SFMOMA by Peter Samis, then associate curator of education, bringing the artist's voice into the galleries (and later to the museum's website) through computer-based, interactive educational tools. The museum's postgraduate Fellowship in the Conservation of Contemporary Art, established in 2001, pioneered a curriculum in which fellows engage directly with artists to document the creation of their work and subsequent care. Collaborating with Richard Cándida Smith of the Regional Oral History Office at the University of California, Berkeley, Jill Sterrett, director of collections, developed the Artist Interview Workshop for Voices in Contemporary Art (VoCA), which provides opportunities for museum professionals to develop skills for interviewing artists about their work; the project began in 2011, with VoCA's predecessor INCCA–North America, then led by board president Inge-Lise Eckmann Lane.



Roger Griffith and Megan Randall

THE LIFE, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION OF BRUCE CONNER'S CHILD

Bruce Conner responded to the high-profile capital-punishment case of Caryl Chessman, who was convicted of and incarcerated for the 1948 kidnapping and rape of a woman in Los Angeles, by creating CHILD (pl. 50, 1959),[1] a frightening sculpture of a small, deformed corpse-like figure. Made from casting wax, the child is strapped to a wooden high chair with a belt and twine, its head tilted back, mouth gaping, its body veiled in torn and stretched nylon stockings (fig. 1). Marking a pivotal moment in Conner's career, CHILD was introduced to the world in an exhibition at the de Young Museum in San Francisco in 1959–60.[2] Reviews of the show highlighted CHILD as its defining piece, likening the sculpture to various gruesome images, including an ax-murder victim and a grave-robber's nightmare.[3] The critical attention surrounding CHILD was so intense that a press release for the November 1960 inaugural exhibition at Batman Gallery in San Francisco, a solo show for Conner, invited viewers to see works made by the artist who had created the "infamous CHILD."[4]

William Seitz, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, immediately recognized the significance of the sculpture and lobbied for its acquisition by the museum; Charles Alan, Conner's gallerist in New York, offered it as a gift. At three separate Painting and Sculpture acquisition meetings in 1960 and 1961, the committee discussed CHILD and concluded with a vote against acquiring it. The fragility and ephemeral nature of the sculpture worried the committee, and, in their view, its artistic quality and inventiveness were insufficient to overcome the objectionable shock effect the work might have on viewers. Alfred H. Barr Jr., director of collections, wrote to Alan to inform him that MoMA would not accept his generous gift.[5] Architect Philip Johnson, then a trustee of the museum, personally acquired the work and exhibited it in various locations across the United States for the next seven years.[6] When Johnson offered CHILD to the museum in 1968, it took another two full years for MoMA to complete the acquisition, and upon entering the collection the work lived quietly in storage.

1 Conner wrote two dates on the underside of the seat of the sculpture, 1959 and 1960.

2 *San Francisco Art Association Artist Members Show*, M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, Dec. 18, 1959–Jan. 17, 1960.

3 See various sources, including: Andrew Curtin, "The Unliked 'Child': Art, or Grave-Robber's Nightmare?" *San Francisco News-Call Bulletin*, Jan. 14, 1960; Alexander Fried, "Weird 'The Child': Sculptor Defines De Young Exhibit," *San Francisco Examiner*, Jan. 15, 1960; Elmont Waite, "That's Not Murder—That's Art," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Jan. 14, 1960; and Alexander Fried, "A Violent Exhibit: Gloom Preoccupies the Local Entrants in a de Young Show," *San Francisco Examiner*, Dec. 27, 1959.

4 Quoted in Kevin Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 68.

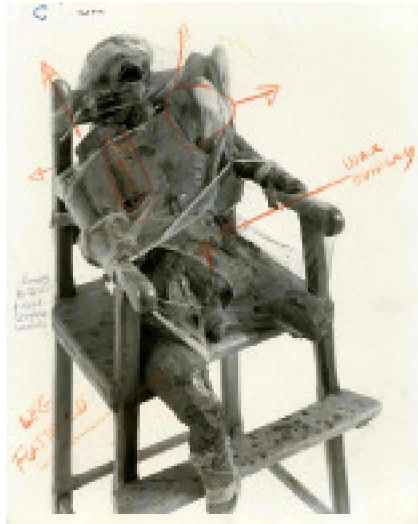
5 Letter from Alfred H. Barr Jr. to Charles Alan, Jan. 16, 1961, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York (hereafter cited as MoMA Archives); memo from Betsy Jones to Dorothy Miller, Oct. 19, 1960, MoMA Archives; and minutes of the Committee on Museum Collections meeting, Nov. 30, 1960, MoMA Archives.

6 Between 1961 and 1968, CHILD was included in the following exhibitions: Alan Gallery, New York, Oct. 2–21, 1961; *Bruce Conner: Assemblages 1954–1964 and New Drawings*, Alan Gallery, New York, May 10–28, 1965; *Bruce Conner: Sculpture, Assemblages, Drawings, Films*, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, Sept. 20–Oct. 24, 1965; *Paintings and Sculpture from the Collection of Philip Johnson*, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Apr. 2–30, 1967; and *Bruce Conner: Sculpture, Assemblages, Collages, Drawings, Films*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Nov. 29–Dec. 31, 1967.

CHILD, 1959 (pl. 50; detail), photographed in 2016 after conservation treatment



1



2

1 CHILD, photographed in 1960. The Museum of Modern Art Conservation Object File

2 Conservation photograph of CHILD with Bruce Conner's notes for further treatment, 1996. The Museum of Modern Art Conservation Object File

Since its acquisition, CHILD has never been exhibited at MoMA. It was, however, lent to exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) in 1976; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C, in 1988; and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1995.[7] Before the first loan, MoMA sculpture conservator Henry Cohen noted that the head and left arm were out of position and the cheeks and mouth had collapsed.[8] After Conner attended the exhibition in San Francisco, he communicated to MoMA that CHILD showed signs of significant deterioration since its creation and averred that the sculpture had likely been acquired by MoMA in this state.[9] He requested that the work be taken off view and returned to New York. He further suggested that CHILD should receive conservation treatment and provided specific guidelines for its care. No treatment was undertaken by conservators, though, and no follow-up notes appear in MoMA's conservation and curatorial files. In November 1995 CHILD was lent to the Whitney for the exhibition *Beat Culture and the New America, 1950–1965*.[10] When Conner saw his sculpture, he was again alarmed by its condition; it was subsequently removed from the exhibition at his request.[11]

Conner sent images of CHILD from 1960, 1976, and the Whitney exhibition to MoMA conservation staff and detailed the work's ongoing deterioration between 1976 and 1996, pointing out that the figure had continued to collapse, specifically the face and mouth, and that the legs and torso appeared compressed. CHILD had lost its "sculptural integrity," he said, but could be restored to the original form.[12] In December 1996 MoMA conservation staff sent Conner an update with images of the work's treatment, addressing in particular the head and chest (fig. 2).[13] In reply, Conner marked the photographs in red grease pencil to indicate further improvements that were needed and included instructions for adding attachments and an interior armature to bring the figure closer to the 1960 form.[14]

On March 17, 1998, Conner arrived at MoMA to observe the progress of the conservation treatment and, to his continued disappointment and frustration, found that no further work had been accomplished. Conner wrote to Kirk Varnedoe, chief curator of painting and

7 *Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Sept. 3–Nov. 21, 1976; *Different Drummers*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., May 12–Aug. 14, 1988; and *Beat Culture and the New America, 1950–1965*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Nov. 9, 1995–Feb. 4, 1996.

8 Henry Cohen, Museum of Modern Art Record of Conservation of Sculpture: 501.1970, Bruce Conner CHILD, June 1976, Conservation Object File, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (hereafter cited as MoMA Conservation Object File).

9 Memo from Charlotte Kantz to Alicia Legg, "Bruce Conner's Visit with Us about CHILD," Nov. 22, 1976, MoMA Archives.

10 MoMA Exhibition History, MoMA Conservation Object File.

11 Memo from Laura Rosenstock to Lynda Zycherman and Patricia Houlihan, Jan. 22, 1996, MoMA Conservation Object File.

12 Letter from Bruce Conner to Patricia Houlihan, Apr. 11, 1996, MoMA Conservation Object File.

13 Letter from Patricia Houlihan to Bruce Conner, Dec. 10, 1996, MoMA Conservation Object File.

14 Letter from Bruce Conner to Patricia Houlihan, Jan. 15, 1997, MoMA Conservation Object File.



3

3 CHILD, photographed in 2000 following the fragmentation of the wax figure during an attempt to adjust the sculpture's position. The Museum of Modern Art Conservation Object File

sculpture, concluding that the museum had failed to address the work's condition and CHILD was thus no longer representative of his intention. According to Conner, CHILD now existed in a "destroyed" state. He stated, "I deleted the reference to MoMA and wrote that the CHILD is 'no longer extant.'"[15] Varnedoe responded by reassuring Conner that MoMA would not show CHILD in a state contrary to his artistic intention.[16] Later that year, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis urged MoMA to revisit CHILD's condition with Conner, hoping it could placate him by promising a future restoration in time for its own exhibition *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II.*[17] CHILD's treatment would not be completed in time for the Walker exhibition, but communication continued between Conner and MoMA conservation staff. Conner expressed his appreciation to Varnedoe for giving him the opportunity to change his mind about the extant status of CHILD.[18]

Toward the end of 1999 Conner sent MoMA conservation staff a detailed letter regarding the fabrication process and materials used to construct CHILD.[19] Though meant to serve as instruction for treatment, the description of the artist's process more importantly predicted the embrittlement and fragility of CHILD's many parts. Conner wrote: "I realized the materials were unstable but chose to proceed with the concept as I was working on it since it was much more successful in achieving the intended image."[20] In April 2000 another attempt to adjust the position of the figure caused the sections of casting wax below its waist to separate like a "house of cards," rendering the sculpture unexhibitable.[21] In response to the museum's written account of this restoration attempt,[22] Conner replied that the letter describing the failed treatment lay in his studio atop a filing cabinet as "untouchable as a pile of stinging nettles." He requested photo documentation of CHILD's condition.[23] Six months after receiving images of CHILD in its collapsed state (fig. 3), Conner finally responded. In a letter addressed to Varnedoe, he stated that he had come to terms with the work's transformation but asked to participate in its further stabilization. He agreed to visible alterations, such as adhesives and braces, and noted that he would consider them part of the work if made.[24] Conner was consistent in this view, having suggested the use of an armature and braces to

15 Letter from Bruce Conner to Kirk Varnedoe, Apr. 29, 1998, MoMA Conservation Object File.

16 Letter from Kirk Varnedoe to Bruce Conner, May 5, 1998, MoMA Conservation Object File.

17 Letter from Kathy Halbreich to Kirk Varnedoe, Nov. 2, 1998, MoMA Conservation Object File.

18 Letter from Bruce Conner to Kirk Varnedoe, Jan. 20, 1999, MoMA Conservation Object File.

19 Letter from Bruce Conner to Patricia Houlihan, Nov. 7, 1999, MoMA Conservation Object File.

20 Ibid.

21 Memo from Patricia Houlihan to Kirk Varnedoe, Apr. 2, 2000, MoMA Conservation Object File.

22 Letter from Patricia Houlihan to Bruce Conner, Nov. 22, 2000, MoMA Conservation Object File.

23 Letter from Bruce Conner to Patricia Houlihan, Dec. 3, 2000, MoMA Conservation Object File.

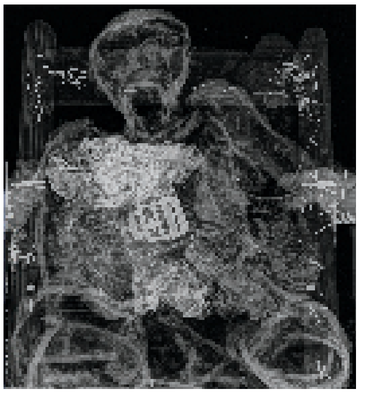
24 Letter from Bruce Conner to Kirk Varnedoe, May 12, 2001, MoMA Conservation Object File.



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4–6 Conservation documentation of CHILD, 2015.
4: Ultraviolet-induced visible fluorescence.
5: Natural light. 6: X-radiography. The Museum of Modern Art Conservation Object File

MoMA previously, in 1976 and again in 1997.[25] Unfortunately, and perhaps due in part to the rapidly declining health of both Conner and Varnedoe, no further treatment or action was undertaken at the time. Conner passed away seven years later, in 2008.

In 2014, six years after Conner's death, CHILD was considered for inclusion in the present exhibition and transported from MoMA's storage to its sculpture conservation department for examination and possible treatment. Ultraviolet and radiography imaging techniques (figs. 4 and 6) confirmed MoMA's understanding of Conner's method of manufacture as he had described it in his 1999 letter: Conner had made CHILD by forming discrete parts of the body and melting or soldering the edges of the wax pieces together. He wrote: "He (John Pearson) showed me how to build sculpture in wax using a dye colored industrial wax. The wax was usually melted and poured out on a flat surface so it would become a flat sheet about ⅛ to ½ inches thick. The wax always had a softness and pliable character . . . even the body heat from my fingers could help bending the thinner pieces." He also revealed that he had originally intended to cast CHILD in bronze but, due to three previous failed casting attempts, had resolved to leave the sculpture in wax to avoid risking another failure.[26]

Its fragile materials and tenuous construction did contribute to the eventual collapse of CHILD, a phenomenon probably accelerated by frequent travel prior to MoMA's 1970 acquisition. Over time, the weight of the wax caused slumping and deformation as the hollow body lacked any internal structure to support its own weight. The collapse of CHILD in 2000 revealed that the superficial tacked joins had provided minimal structural integrity, and that the work's disintegration was due in part to these weak original attachments.[27]

25 Letter from Alicia Legg to Charlotte Kantz, Nov. 22, 1976, MoMA Conservation Object File; letter from Conner to Houlihan, Jan. 15, 1997.

26 Letter from Conner to Houlihan, Nov. 7, 1999.

27 Memo from Houlihan to Varnedoe, Apr. 2, 2000.



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7–8 CHILD (full view and detail), photographed in 2016 following conservation treatment

In an effort to help guide decisions on how to move forward with CHILD's preservation, MoMA conservation staff organized a study day in May 2015 with Robert Conway of the Conner Family Trust and conservators and scholars from MoMA, SFMOMA, the Walker Art Center, and the Art Institute of Chicago in attendance.[28] Participants discussed the history and current condition of CHILD, as well as the breadth of Conner's other assemblage works. Correspondence related to CHILD and Conner's myriad, often contradictory, thoughts on its condition from the 1970s to his death in 2008 were also examined. Conner's relationship to MoMA and other museums was, famously, often tense. His inability, due to illness, to visit or consult effectively on the conservation of CHILD was a substantial part of the study-day discussions. The inherent tension between preservation efforts and Conner's eccentric perspective on an artist's role was summed up in a July 6, 1999, letter to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, which at the time was preparing a loan for the Bruce Conner retrospective at the Walker Art Center. "I expected that I would continue to work on the assemblage and collage works of the 1960s. It was part of the artistic process for the works," Conner wrote. "The alternative to placing the work in the show is to leave it hidden from public view where it can disintegrate and never be seen. . . . I believe that no risk with hidden archival storage is not preferable to the normal risk of loaning the work for display."[29]

CHILD's collapsed sections have been reshaped and reassembled and the body supported with an internal armature made from a thermoplastic polyester resin, ensuring future structural stability (fig. 7). The surviving nylon stockings have been restretched to their original positions and replacements added where necessary to veil the figure as Conner had originally intended (fig. 8). This violent sculpture entered the world in 1960 as a personal response to a newspaper headline, disturbing audiences locally, then nationally. After spending most of its fifty-five years in storage, CHILD will again offer a disturbing, and immensely powerful, viewing experience.

28 Transcript of Bruce Conner Study Day at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 14, 2015, MoMA Conservation Object File.

29 Fax from Bruce Conner to Fiona Ragheb, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, July 6, 1999. Conner was writing in response to the museum's hesitation about THE MARCEL DUCHAMP TRAVELLING BOX (1963, pl. 81) traveling to other museums after the Walker Art Center's presentation of *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II*.



Rachel Federman

TWENTY-FOUR-HOUR ART: BRUCE CONNER'S ENVIRONMENTS

I want to make ROOMS.

How can I make ROOMS?

I need people who want me to make rooms for them.

It will cost them money. They will have to be rich people.

This was Bruce Conner's response when Charles Alan requested something special to include in the Alan Gallery's tenth anniversary exhibition in 1962. Among the rooms he envisioned were a FALL-OUT SHELTER, a SHRINE, a TOMB, a HAPPY WOMB ROOM, and a MEAT ROOM ("a terror"). The artist had moved to Mexico the previous year, hoping that conditions there would enable him to create immersive installations such as those he proposed to Alan. "I thought when I went to Mexico that it was to become an expanding universe for me. I would live inexpensively, and I would hire people to produce huge environments of work," he said. To his disappointment, though, "My economics shrank to nothing. . . . I tried to pursue this concept when I returned to the United States. Nobody wanted to listen and it more or less died away."[1]

Conner had been envisioning his work in terms of total environments long before his move to Mexico. He intended for A MOVIE (1958, pl. 9), his first film, to be shown in "a room that I was going to build. It had an outside and inside. It would be a room inside of a room. . . . The whole thing would be an assemblage, something you would walk inside of. What people would later call 'an environment.'"[2] It would have incorporated moving images, strobe lights, radio, and television.[3]

Conner once told a pair of interviewers that the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) invited him in the 1970s "to do an environment in a gallery." He proposed to live and work in one of the museum's galleries for one month, unannounced, and suggested a

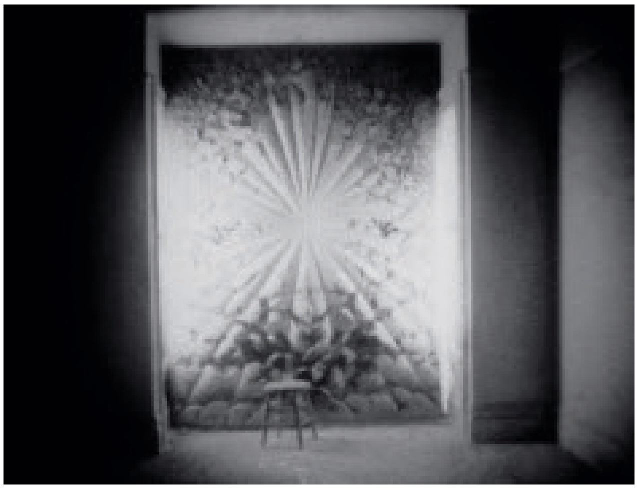
PILLOW, 1961–64 (pl. 65), installed as part of Bruce Conner's solo exhibition at the Batman Gallery, San Francisco, 1964. Photograph by Vivian Kurz. Bruce Conner Photograph Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

Epigraph: letter from Bruce Conner to Charles Alan, May 10, 1962, Alan Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

1 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Peter Boswell, Sept. 15, 1985, Steven Fama Collection on Bruce Conner, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 15.

2 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Peter Boswell, Mar. 19, 1986, edited by Conner, Mar. 1997, Walker Art Center Archives, Minneapolis, 6–7.

3 See Mia Culpa, "Bruce Conner: Part Two" (interview), *Damage* 1, no. 4 (Jan. 1980): 7.



1

1 THE WHITE ROSE 1967 (still). 16mm, black and white, sound, 7 min. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

space off a corridor where entrances could be blocked by moveable partitions. Only the sounds of his labor would cue visitors to the unusual activity occurring inside: "They might look around the partition. 'What are you doing in there?' 'I am working.' 'Well, what is it?' 'I can't talk to you outside there.' So then they would have to come in." Conner in retrospect identified this proposal, which the museum rejected, as an attempt to use the very "uniqueness of the museum, its environment, its limitations and expectations" as his medium.[4]

As these examples suggest, Conner had an enduring desire to create not only discrete works of art—whether film, painting, assemblage, drawing, or collage—but also multisensory spaces that would surround a viewer. His proposal to SFMOMA seems to indicate that this urge was driven in part by a wish to share his life and working methods more directly with his audience. On several occasions he discussed his own living environment as a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* reminiscent of Kurt Schwitters's Hanover *Merzbau* (1923–36), an evolving room-size construction that Schwitters undertook in his home studio. Conner described the combination living room/bedroom of one apartment in San Francisco, which he had painted dark brown and covered with collages and blinking Christmas lights, as "an environment floor to ceiling."[5] "The collages, assemblages, sculptures, drawings, and everything else would fill my house," he once said. "But the studio was like The Brain. It was a mind of its own. The walls would be covered with pieces. I would incorporate sounds on tape machine, lighting effect, etcetera."[6]

He was drawn to similar totalizing qualities in other artists' studios. Describing the room where his close friend Jay DeFeo had created *The Rose* (1958–66), he said, "The room itself was the work. The stool, the floor [were] covered with the chunks of almost fleshlike paint that would be scraped off of the canvas. And she also mixed a powder with the paint that had a mica-like sparkle to it. So walking into this room was like walking into a temple; it was almost alive."[7] The painting was effectively site-specific, its dimensions tailored to the bay window where it stood. When a rent increase in 1965 forced DeFeo to leave her apartment, Conner documented the event, capturing not only the drama of the massive painting's removal through the window, but also the environment that had fostered its creation (fig. 1).

4 Bruce Conner in Hans Ulrich Obrist and Gunnar B. Kvaran, "Interview: Bruce Conner," *Domus*, no. 885 (Oct. 2005): 27. No record of this exchange has been found in SFMOMA's archives. The "limitations and expectations" of the museum became a fertile subject for artists in the 1970s. Vito Acconci had his mail forwarded to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) during its *Information* show (July 2–Sept. 20, 1970), and Hans Haacke's critical work documenting slumlords in New York led to the cancellation of his solo exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1971. Alternatives to museums and commercial galleries proliferated during this time. One such organization, New York's Institute for Art and Urban Resources Inc. (now MoMA PS1), moved into an abandoned schoolhouse in Long Island City, Queens, in 1976. Notably, its inaugural exhibition was called *Rooms* (June 9–26, 1976).

5 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Peter Boswell, July 20, 1983, revised by Conner, Jan. 31, 1997, Walker Art Center Archives, Minneapolis, 9.

6 Conner, interview by Boswell, Sept. 15, 1985, 15.

7 "Bruce Conner on Jay DeFeo's *The Rose*," video interview, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Dec. 1994, http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/311. Conner later "asked for, and received, the footstool she used when painting *The Rose* for seven years. She attached a note to the footstool. It said: *For Bruce / love, Jay / ('we are not what we seem')*." Bruce Conner, "Jay DeFeo: A Conversation," *Grand Street* 52 (Spring 1995): 234.

For the most part, Conner's efforts to create immersive environments appear to have been thwarted by pragmatic concerns. The light shows he performed with the North American Ibis Alchemical Company for Family Dog productions at San Francisco's Avalon Ballroom in 1967 are a notable exception. Conner viewed them as a popularization of multimedia experiments undertaken by artists for narrower audiences, such as *Movie-Mural,* Stan VanDerBeek's contribution to John Cage and Merce Cunningham's *Variations V* (1965).[8] "What I was doing at the Avalon was improvising and making full-color images on a 180-degree screen live, with an immediate audience, working with the music directly. The euphoria was tremendous," he said.[9] When the Ibis Company's leader, Ben Van Meter, insisted on rear projection for a performance with Patrick Gleeson at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now SFMOMA) in November 1967, Conner rebelled. Van Meter "was turning it all into a framed artwork," Conner complained. "So I went over to one of the partitions and pulled it away; another fell flat down. . . . I pulled and pulled at the projection screen until everything was projecting all over the place. The band kept playing through the whole mindless explosion."[10]

Like VanDerBeek, Conner was interested in the creative intersection of dance and film. In 1974 he projected images in the rotunda of the San Francisco Museum of Art, then housed in the War Memorial Veterans Building, while dancers from Anna Halprin's San Francisco Dancers' Workshop performed. ("Great environment last night at the museum!" Halprin wrote to him.)[11] This was only a reduced version of a project he had hoped to produce with Halprin and her troupe in the mid-1960s, however:

> They were doing theater called *Parades and Changes* [1965]. I was taking classes from her. I was working as a production consultant for this thing. A guy named Patrick Hickey was doing the lighting. I suggested other ways of dealing with the lighting, which I wanted to project from the sides with patterns and from the front and so on. There was one event where they went through a process of taking their clothes off, putting them back on again, taking them off, putting them back on. . . . Then they rolled great sheets of paper on stage and tore the paper up. And finally turned the masses of paper into big sculptures, which I felt would really work well with light projecting onto the figures and the paper. Everything would become one great mass of patterns of light ever-changing. But Hickey was in charge of the lights and I wasn't allowed to do any of that.[12]

To the extent that Conner was able to realize his vision for work on an environmental scale, it was primarily through designs for his own exhibitions. "I think of my work in the context of theater when it's in a gallery," he once said. "The environment, the lighting, the period of time involved, the people that come in, their expectations, their actions. . . . It's the same relationship with music events, light shows, film, etcetera—there are theatrical aspects to any presentation."[13]

8 See Andrew V. Uroskie, *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Gloria Sutton, *The Experience Machine: Stan VanDerBeek's Movie-Drome and Expanded Cinema Practices* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

9 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Lee Bartlett, May–July 1991, edited by Conner, Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereafter cited as BCP), 22.

10 Ibid., 21–22. The audience believed that this was part of the show. A reviewer raved: "There was a theme, or moral. As the stimuli reached their climactic conclusion, the screen was gradually withdrawn . . . and there were the projectionists, throwing light in the audience['s] eye, and on the ceiling and walls. . . . But the [projected] Disney characters, like the screen, were gone. Removed in fact just as they are removed . . . from life." Philip Elmwood, "Sounds, Lights with a Moral," *San Francisco Examiner*, Nov. 24, 1967.

11 Anna Halprin, handwritten note on invitation to event honoring the twentieth anniversary of the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop, 1974, BCP.

12 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Paul Karlstrom, Aug. 12, 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

13 Conner, interview by Boswell, Sept. 15, 1985, 13.



2

2 Installation view of *Bruce Conner: MATRIX/Berkeley 102*, University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 1986–87

For the first exhibition of his punk photographs, at the Smith Andersen Gallery in Palo Alto, California, in 1986, Conner borrowed a bamboo chair from the Mabuhay Gardens, the club where he had taken the photos. He suspended the chair from the ceiling with fishing wire and adhered decals of bullet holes to the gallery's front window, evoking the anarchic setting that had inspired the series.[14] Later that year, he installed some of his darkest-hued works—photograms and dense ink drawings in black from the mid-1970s—on black walls at the University Art Museum at the University of California, Berkeley (now the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive), and accompanied them with live crickets housed in a black box mounted in a corner of the gallery (fig. 2).[15] One visitor remembers the installation created a perceptual experience of some duration as his senses adjusted to the darkened space and unexpected soundtrack.[16]

Conner realized some of his most ambitious exhibition schemes early in his career, at San Francisco's Batman Gallery. In contrast to the galleries and museums of established art centers like New York, San Francisco's institutions were relatively young and mutable, providing opportunities for artistic interventions that may have been elusive elsewhere.[17] Founded by William (Billy) and Joan Jahrmarkt, the Batman Gallery opened in November 1960 with an exhibition by Conner (figs. 3–4). (Its name was suggested by poet Michael McClure in recognition of Billy Jahrmarkt's enthusiasm for Batman comics.)[18] The announcement promised an exhibition both "monumental and extremely shocking" by "the artist who did the infamous CHILD." Conner, by his own account, did more than simply install his work: "I found this location [2222 Fillmore Street]. I contacted [architect] Ernie Burden, who had been one of the people running the Designers' Gallery, and together we designed the inside of the gallery."[19] Perhaps most striking was the choice of wall color: black. The walls of Burden's own gallery, which presented one of Conner's first solo shows in 1958, consisted of double-sided panels—each with one side white, one black—that could be rotated to suit the exhibition.[20] The Batman Gallery was similarly flexible, incorporating a system of moveable panels, also painted black.[21] As writer Rebecca Solnit has commented, the gallery "was probably best suited to showcase Conner's work."[22]

14 Details of the installation provided by Tom Thompson, preparator at Smith Andersen Editions (previously Gallery), Palo Alto, California, telephone conversation with the author, June 30, 2015.

15 Aware of the artist's reputation for being difficult, the exhibition's curator, Constance Lewallen, had given him carte blanche. The small exhibition was part of the museum's MATRIX series for contemporary art. Constance Lewallen, telephone conversation with the author, Mar. 17, 2015.

16 Dean Smith, conversation with the author, Berkeley, July 24, 2015.

17 See Seymour Howard et al., *The Beat Generation: Galleries and Beyond* (Davis, CA: John Natsoulas Press, 1996).

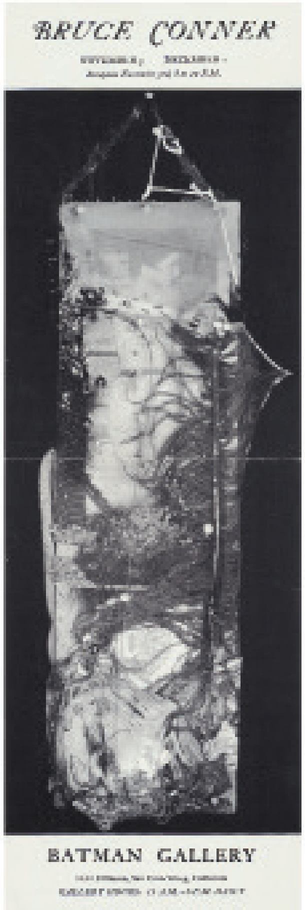
18 See Bill Morgan, *The Beat Generation in San Francisco: A Literary Tour* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2003), 152.

19 Conner, interview by Boswell, Mar. 19, 1986, 5.

20 Burden traces his use of black panels to his architectural training at the University of Oklahoma under Bruce Goff: "The school had an interior with walls of black Celotex—a textured panel in 4' × 8' sheets. Drawings could be tacked up with little damage, and of course, it emphasized the colored drawings the best. So, naturally, when we designed our gallery, it was the material of choice." Ernie Burden, email to the author, July 21, 2015.

21 Details of the space provided to the author in schematic drawings by Tony Lack, codirector of Ecliptic Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.

22 Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990), 74.



3



4

3–4 Announcement and installation view of Bruce Conner's solo exhibition at the Batman Gallery, San Francisco, 1960. Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

Poet Kenneth Rexroth wrote of the gallery in the *San Francisco Examiner,* "The decor is original and effective," noting further that the opening was "jam-packed, and best of all, the pictures sell. And well they might. They are by Bruce Conner, a young man full of beans."[23] Longtime *San Francisco Chronicle* critic Alfred Frankenstein likened the exhibition, which included more than seventy-five assemblages, drawings, and paintings (some no longer extant), to a "magic grotto, full of things that have been put under enchantment."[24] The image echoes Marcel Duchamp's description of his own design for the 1938 International Exhibition of Surrealism in Paris—which also featured black walls—as a "central grotto."[25] Art historian T. J. Demos describes the 1938 exhibition as "the reinvention of installation design as a new form of collage brought to an architectural scale."[26] Conner's 1960 exhibition at Batman has been described in similar terms, as "a kind of exploded assemblage," in which "works dangled from the ceiling and gathered in piles on the floor, while lit candles flickered and melted wax over works."[27]

Conner had known Duchamp's work since his student days. Simply comparing Duchamp's cover design for the catalogue of the 1947 International Exhibition of Surrealism—a hand-painted foam breast on the front, with "Prière de Toucher" printed in large letters on the back—with Conner's cards reading "Please Touch," which he distributed to friends, seemingly in response to institutional proscriptions against touching his tactile works (figs. 5–7), suffices to convince one of the directness and specificity of his relationship to Duchamp. He once

23 Kenneth Rexroth, "Shockers by a Midwest Artist and Elegance from an English Ballet," *San Francisco Examiner*, Nov. 13, 1960.

24 Alfred Frankenstein, "The Batman Makes Its Bow with Modern 'Junk,'" *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle*, Nov. 13, 1960. Some accounts put the number of works at ninety-nine.

25 Marcel Duchamp quoted in Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1987), 81. On the 1938 International Exhibition of Surrealism, see Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali, and Surrealist Exhibition Installations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 31–101; T. J. Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 128–88.

26 Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp*, 130.

27 Kevin Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 68.



5

5 Marcel Duchamp, cover for *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, 1947. Edited by André Breton, texts by various authors. Multiple of foam rubber breast, printed label, and velvet, mounted on cover from an illustrated book with eighteen lithographs, four etchings (two with aquatint), one photogravure, two woodcuts, one readymade object (folder front), and reproductions; cover (unfolded): 9 7/16 × 17 11/16 × 2 in. (24 × 45 × 5.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Henry Church Fund

proposed that Charles Alan present an exhibition in which "Duchamp would be represented by works he had signed but hadn't made, and Conner would contribute an unsigned, invisible painting . . . by putting a fresh coat of white paint on the gallery walls and sculpture pedestals."[28] Conner said that Charles "didn't want" to suggest it, "and I was so apprehensive of speaking to Duchamp that I never brought it up."[29] In November 1963 he attended a lecture delivered by Duchamp at Brandeis University, near Boston. He had brought a gift for the older artist, a small glass and metal box filled with assorted objects, including a stamp of Conner's name, which he sometimes used in place of his signature during that period. The box is wrapped in string, and a partially melted candle rests atop it (pl. 81).[30] Conner told an interviewer that the string related to Duchamp's "mile of string" that crisscrossed the galleries of the First Papers of Surrealism Exhibition in New York in 1942.[31] In that exhibition, as it had in the 1938 show, Duchamp's installation subordinated the art to the environment itself.

In *Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings,* Allan Kaprow's 1966 anthology about these linked practices, he observes that freestanding assemblages tend to draw one's attention to the architectural enclosure. "Here," he writes, "is where the two structures become inimical."[32] Rather than flee the enclosure, some artists choose to make the work even larger, so that it becomes something like a "chapel or grotto": "In some cases this happens as a consequence of a certain frustration caused by the discrepancy between the art and the surrounding architectural space—as though sheer size could drown out the discomfort. In others it is simply a turning away from this rift as an insoluble problem and a pursuit of the inner evolution of one's work, in which one thing suggests another, which in turn suggests another, and so on . . . expanding the work until it fills an entire space or evolves one, thus becoming an Environment."[33]

For Kaprow, the environment evolves in direct response to the challenges presented by the architectural enclosure. His evocation of chapels and grottoes—analogous to Conner's

28 Joan Rothfuss, "Escape Artist," in *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II*, exh. cat., ed. Peter Boswell, Bruce Jenkins, and Rothfuss (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 174.

29 Elizabeth Armstrong, "Interviews with Ed Ruscha and Bruce Conner," *October* 70 (Fall 1994): 59.

30 See Rothfuss, "Escape Artist," 173–74.

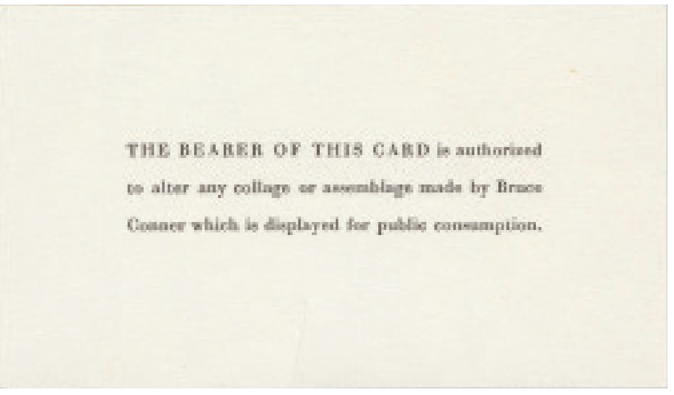
31 Overwhelmed by Duchamp's presence, Conner decided not to give it to him as a gift, instead asking him to deliver the box—known today as THE MARCEL DUCHAMP TRAVELLING BOX—to Charles Alan. Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Elizabeth Armstrong, June 9, 1994, BCP, 4 (this is an unabridged version of the interview cited here in note 29); see also Rothfuss, "Escape Artist," 173–74.

32 Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966), 164.

33 Ibid., 164–65.



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6–7 Printed card produced by Bruce Conner (front and back), ca. 1963

SHRINE, FALL-OUT SHELTER, or HAPPY WOMB ROOM—underscores his understanding of these spaces not only as refuges from the physical and ideological limitations of the gallery, but also as deeply symbolic spaces ("one thing suggests another, which in turn suggests another").[34]

For Conner (as for many artists), the evolution of discrete works into environments necessarily took place either in the private spaces of home and studio or in the public spaces of a gallery or museum exhibition. While the exigencies of public presentation may exacerbate the "rift" between artwork and environment theorized by Kaprow, Conner's active role in the design of the Batman Gallery mitigated this effect for his 1960 exhibition there. If Duchamp and his collaborators on the 1938 Surrealist exhibition wished to conceal the architecture of the conservative Galerie Beaux-Arts,[35] Conner had no need to do so. Nevertheless, he appears to have looked to Duchamp's example of an exhibition that exceeded, and even undermined, its presentational function to become something more, something akin to a "chapel or grotto." THE BRIDE (1960, pl. 30), in fact, had to be reconstructed after its inclusion in the 1960 exhibition because it had been shown with candles burning the whole time.[36]

As we have seen, Conner created grotto-like spaces in his own home. The Batman Gallery therefore may have functioned as a hybrid space, something between the private sphere of the home and the public realm of commercial galleries and museums: "I conceived of developing rooms or environments but not necessarily in the context of a walk-through show," he once said. "It would be a living space, a home, a place, a forbidding place, it would

34 Schwitters himself referred to the niches of his *Merzbau* as "grottoes" and "caves." See Dorothea Dietrich, *The Collages of Kurt Schwitters: Tradition and Innovation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 166.

35 See Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp*, 153.

36 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Kristine Stiles, Apr. 15, 1995, BCP, 1.



8

8 SUITCASE (1961–63, pl. 64), installed as part of Bruce Conner's solo exhibition at the Batman Gallery, San Francisco, 1964. Photograph by Vivian Kurz. Bruce Conner Photograph Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

have mysteries, objects."[37] In the summer of 1964, Conner came even closer to putting this idea into action, again using the Batman Gallery, now painted white and under new ownership, as a vehicle.[38] If the 1960 exhibition could be likened to a grotto, the 1964 exhibition is much harder to define.

Anticipating his later proposal to live and work in one of SFMOMA's galleries, Conner was on site for all seventy-two hours of his 1964 exhibition, which was open twenty-four hours a day during its brief run (August 11–13). When asked by an interviewer why he slept there, his laconic response was, "I couldn't stay awake for seventy-two hours." To the question of why the gallery remained open for twenty-four hours, he answered, "The work gets to stay there twenty-four hours a day."[39] Conner changed the installation daily: "I stacked and moved things, burned candles, emptied parts of the room and made substitutions."[40] When a newspaper photographer was scheduled to arrive, he hid some of the assemblages, replacing them with an automobile tire and a stack of wine glasses.[41] He rested in a back room when he got tired.[42] Although radical within the context of a commercial exhibition, none of these activities would have been unusual had they occurred—as they surely did—in the artist's studio.

To further emphasize the intimacy of this event, Conner advertised it in the personal columns of the *Los Angeles Times* and the *San Francisco Examiner*. Mimicking the urgency of sales jargon, he wrote:

> BRUCE Conner now new paintings.
>
> Now open °now 24 hours' now
>
> Batman[43]

In addition to debuting the thirteen-panel TOUCH/DO NOT TOUCH (1964, pl. 83), which Conner later described as "a portable environment,"[44] the exhibition was filled with personal items that he had transformed into assemblages, primarily while living in Mexico City in 1961–62, including his suitcase, shoes, and a pillow, its indexical relationship to the body

37 Conner, interview by Boswell, Sept. 15, 1985, 15.

38 In 1962 the gallery was sold to Michael Agron, a psychiatrist who conducted research on LSD.

39 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Joan Rothfuss, Nov. 14, 1997, edited by Conner, Feb. 10, 1998, and May 1998, Walker Art Center Special Collections, Minneapolis, 26–27.

40 Conner in Obrist and Kvaran, "Interview: Bruce Conner," 27.

41 Bruce Conner, interview by Rothfuss, Nov. 14, 1997, 28.

42 Jack Foley, "O Her Blackness Sparkles," in *The Beat Generation: Galleries and Beyond*, 178.

43 Rothfuss, "Escape Artist," 180n71.

44 Bruce Conner, interview by Boswell, Sept. 15, 1985.



9

9 Bruce and Jean Conner lying inside a glass jeweler's case in his solo exhibition at the Batman Gallery, San Francisco, 1964. Photograph by Edmund Shea. Bruce Conner Photograph Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

underscored by its placement on a chair (fig. 8, pls. 63–65, and p. 298). Various elements combined to give the exhibition "something of the quality of a church."[45] As poet Jack Foley has written, "In Conner's powerful imagination, the Batman Gallery became for that three day period *his* church, and like all churches it was a combination of *womb* and *tomb*."[46] One extraordinary photo shows Conner and his wife, Jean, stripped down, lying together inside a glass jeweler's case, its surface and interior strewn with jewel-like marbles (fig. 9).[47] Conner was photographed numerous times inside the case—as alive and changeable as he considered his work to be—and he invited others to climb in as well. Among those who did were Vivian Kurz, the subject of VIVIAN (1964), which was filmed at the Batman Gallery during the exhibition, transforming it into another kind of environment altogether: a film set (pp. 51 and 52).[48]

As mentioned before, Conner's desire to create environments appears to have originated with an unrealized plan for A MOVIE. Noting the curious and conspicuous absence of experimental film from the Museum of Modern Art's 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* and its related events, art historian Andrew Uroskie writes, "Artists then attempting to work *between* art and cinema found little support for their work within the institutions of either art *or* cinema."[49] Expanded cinema of the postwar years, which frequently combined film and multiple projections with live performance, challenged both the cinematic paradigm of spectatorial immersion in an illusionistic narrative and the modernist paradigm of medium specificity. Conner appears to have adopted the "homelessness of the moving image"[50] as his muse for the seventy-two-hour show at the Batman Gallery. He created an environment that was prescient in its refusal to adhere to established categories: it was a place both public and private, mercantile and sacred, a site of both production and consumption.

Years later Conner conjured a compelling image of the exhibition, telling an interviewer, "One night George Herms and Wallace Berman drove from Los Angeles to the gallery, sat on the floor in the front room, and I projected my 8mm films on the wall. This was the night there was expected to be a massive meteor shower above our part of the United States [but] San Francisco was fogged."[51] His visitors could not have been disappointed.

45 Foley, "O Her Blackness Sparkles," 178. See also Gary Garrels, "Soul Stirrer: Visions and Realities of Bruce Conner," in this volume.

46 Ibid.

47 At the opening of his solo exhibition at the Antonio Souza Gallery in Mexico City in September 1962, Conner carried marbles into the gallery in a suitcase and spilled them onto the floor.

48 See also Dara Birnbaum, "Three Women, Three Films: Bruce Conner in the 1960s," in this volume.

49 Uroskie, *Between the Black Box and the White Cube*, 111. Uroskie notes that Joseph Cornell's boxes were installed in a black space intended to underscore their theatricality.

50 Ibid., 233.

51 Conner, interview by Rothfuss, Nov. 14, 1997, 27.



255 **BLESSING ANGEL** 1975

Bruce Conner and Edmund Shea
Gelatin silver print
85 × 39 in. (215.9 × 99.1 cm)
Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland

Kristine Stiles

BRUCE CONNER'S EYES

I. A FAIRY TALE

Bruce Conner: Angels—Photograms, 1973–1975 opened on March 8, 1983, at the Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco. A week or so before the opening, Bruce asked me if I would be willing to dress as "Bride of the Angels" and appear "unannounced" at the gallery. I agreed. Soon after, this letter arrived in my mail:

> THE OPENING FOR MY SHOW OF ANGELS AT
> THE FRAENKEL GALLERY, 55 GRANT AVE, is at 5:30–7:30
> ON TIESDAY, MARCH 8th.
>
> SINCE I HAVE A SCHEDULED MEETING AT 6:00 FOR DRUNKARDS AND DOPERS, I WILL
> LEAVE THE GALLERY RECEPTION BY 6:00 and try to return to the gallery about 7:30.
>
> SO, I THINK IT WOULD BE APPROPRIATE IF YOU WOULD APPEAR
> IN FULL BRIDAL DRESS AT 6:00 AT THE GALLERY.
> I HOPE THAT YOU ARE STILL SERIOUS ABOUT IT.
> CAN I BUY YOU A BRIDAL BOUQUET TO CARRY?
>
> —BRUCE[1]

Although the misspelling "TIESDAY" may have initially been a typographical error, Bruce's characteristic precision suggests that he intended the wordplay and left the typo to enhance the conceptual dimensions and performativity of his imagined activity.[2] TIESDAY may have signified that he would dress with a "tie" for the occasion; that the Bride and the ANGELS would "tie the knot"; or that he planned to "tie one on" at a bachelor party.[3]

The anecdotal footnotes to this essay provide some history leading to, and concurrent with, the events described here. Thanks to Mitali Routh for her astute comments on this essay.

1 Bruce Conner, undated letter to the author, Kristine Stiles Collection, 1900–present, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, Duke University (hereafter cited as Stiles Collection).

2 Conner enjoyed wordplay. For example, he sent me a flyer for "Giants of Independent Film," featuring him and other filmmakers. On the bottom he wrote, "BE THERE OR BE COOL," a play on "Be there or be square." Bruce Conner, letter to the author, Dec. 13, 1982, Stiles Collection.

3 "Bride of the Angels" may have been inspired by *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1912–23), with its bachelors sending failed erotic "shots" to the bride.

Bruce had long been interested in the idea and image of the bride, as his assemblage THE BRIDE (1960, pl. 30) suggests.[4] But he never offered an explanation for why he wanted me to appear as such, and I did not ask, only assuming that she would be a diversion to enliven a routine art opening and break the monotony of the chitchat he loathed. As his assistant, or his "secretary," as he liked to refer to me, appearing as "Bride of the Angels" was a more lively task than sorting drawings and typing letters.[5] Furthermore, Bruce knew that in addition to being a graduate student, I worked in various capacities in San Francisco's exclusive retail store I. Magnin's, where I sometimes modeled and was assigned to wear wedding gowns. Being in my twenties and already into a second marriage, I often joked with Bruce and his wife, Jean, that I was "never a bridesmaid, always a bride," reversing the terms of the cliché. Moreover, I had regaled them at lunches in their kitchen with episodic stories about my six-week stint as the store's bridal buyer. Management had called upon me to resolve a problem with a botched bridal gown that had landed the distressed bridal buyer in traction in the hospital, leaving the hysterical bride without a gown as her wedding date neared and her wealthy parents threatening a lawsuit. In response to these stories, in 1981 Bruce and Jean sent me an old copy of the 1930s pulp magazine *Love Story,* which they had found at a yard sale in Kansas. It featured an article entitled "Dream Marriage." It was against such a backdrop that I borrowed a sumptuous, costly, sample wedding gown and veil from I. Magnin's and prepared for the appearance of the Bride.

Planning for the opening, Bruce asked if I knew someone who could take pictures, explaining that he especially wanted "a full-length image of 'Bride of the Angels' standing before an ANGEL photogram." I volunteered my friend the artist Suzanne Mailloux, and he grilled me about her ability to take "good" pictures. Bruce's demanding perfectionism often unnerved me, and I responded by proclaiming effusively about Suzanne's skills.[6] In the psychological self-undoing that hounded both Bruce's rigor and my defensiveness, my self-protective posture could be blamed for the uncanny menace that doomed Suzanne's effort. Unbeknownst to her, during the opening, the camera's shutter stuck and the malfunction produced only black or dark and beclouded half images. Bruce was furious. He lectured me on how a competent photographer would have made certain that her camera was in working order before a shoot, reprimanded me for having failed to select an experienced photographer, and flatly rejected the photographs. They were, nevertheless, evocative. I saved them, returning to them afresh only after being asked to write this essay.

In 1986, three years after the debacle of the photographs and after I had moved to Washington, D.C., I received a phone call from Bruce. He invited me to appear again at the Fraenkel Gallery as a bride for the show *Bruce Conner: Selected Works (with Photographs), 1959–1978*, an

4 In "Documentation of Repair" of THE BRIDE, Conner noted that it caught fire in 1961, when the candles on it were lit during an exhibition. See Stiles Collection.

5 In 1975 I was a graduate student in art history at the University of California, Berkeley, and the student newspaper sent me to report on *Poets of the Cities: New York and San Francisco, 1950–1965* at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now SFMOMA). Several artists and poets assembled to discuss the exhibition, including Claes Oldenburg, Wallace Berman, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Intimidated by the legendary figures, I hid behind various walls in the galleries. At a certain moment, I peered around a wall only to find someone peering back at me. I instinctively ducked behind the wall and then impulsively peeked out again. This time, with exquisite timing, he was inches from my face. Ceasing the peekaboo game, he came from around the partition and said: "Hi, little girl," his eyes bespeaking wicked pleasure. "What are you doing?"

Indignant at being described as a child, and embarrassed for having behaved as one, I answered with naive pomp: "I am a reporter and a doctoral student at Berkeley." He did not crack a smile. "Very good. Do you have any favorite works in the show?" "I do." "Would you like to show them to me?" "Oh! Yes." I led him over to Bruce Conner's COUCH (1963, pl. 49). "Why don't you tell me about it?" I seized the opportunity to restore my dignity and launched into a tutorial: Conner had referred to Jacques-Louis David's *Portrait of Madame Récamier* (1800); he had replaced Juliette Récamier, the reclining aristocratic socialite, with a charred skeleton on a decaying, paint-splattered couch, a postatomic version of David's elegant late eighteenth-century chaise longue; COUCH served as a memento mori reminding viewers of revolution, war, destruction, and the inevitability of death; the work was also indebted to Dada and Surrealism; and Neil A. Chassman, in his catalogue essay, had named Conner among the "counterculture visionaries searching for a reconstitution of authentic reformation of the world." When I finished, the man said: "Would you like to meet Bruce Conner?" "No! No! No!" I exclaimed, petrified at the prospect. He said, "I am Bruce Conner." I ran away.

Three years later, I encountered Conner at an opening. He approached with his usual mischievous expression and knowingly superior attitude, and asked if the reason that I wore my glasses on my head "like that" was because I had eyes in the top of my head (I was using the glasses as a hair band). He always established the upper hand in any encounter; I felt the fool in his presence and managed to disengage myself quickly. The next morning, I picked up the phone and recognized his distinctive gravelly high voice. "Is this Kristine Stiles?" "Yes." "Good morning. This is Bruce Conner. Can you type?" "Yes." "You are hired as my secretary, if you want the job." "Yes."

6 While exacting, Conner was also exceedingly generous to me, such as when he gave me his vintage portable Olivetti Lettera 22 typewriter, designed by Marcello Nizzoli in 1950, so that I would have it to use while doing my doctoral research in Europe, and when he gave me his father's watch so that I would become more punctual.



1



2

1–2 Bruce Conner with Kristine Stiles as "The Bride of Bruce Conner, Assembled" at the opening of *Bruce Conner: Selected Works (with Photographs), 1959–1978*, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, 1986. Photographs by Edmund Shea. Kristine Stiles promised gift to the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University

exhibition of some of his assemblages and ANGELS. This time, he explained, I was to be "The Bride of Bruce Conner, Assembled." Intent on acquiring professional photographs, the very objects that seemed to be his primary aim in arranging "Bride of the Angels," he hired Edmund Shea, the photographer with whom he had collaborated to document his bodily actions in creating the ANGELS. Although of excellent quality, thwarting Bruce once again, Edmund, too, forgot to take a photograph of "The Bride of Bruce Conner, Assembled" in full length standing with an ANGEL. The pictures turned out to be little more than snapshots at an opening (figs. 1–3). Nothing is notable. Nothing is serious. Nothing is of interest.

Even Bruce and the Bride seemed to realize that a second appearance of the "Bride of the Angels," no matter how different, was destined to fail. He dressed in seersucker pants and a long-sleeved, Western-style, snap-button shirt with a geometric print, over which he added a Hawaiian short-sleeved shirt, becoming undeniably "Bruce Conner, Assembled," a nerd with a pen and paper in his breast pocket. The Bride wore an unattractive, flamboyant satin gown with absurd poufs at the shoulders, unruly bangs under a jaunty headband of lace flowers with sprays of dangling pearls resembling Fourth of July sparklers. Anything but the picture of a bride worthy of angels, she was barely credible as "assembled."[7] But she was inadvertently in keeping with the folding lawn chair that Bruce brought from home to the gallery and through whose webbing, in a raucous moment, he stuck his head in order to wear the chair around his neck (fig. 2).

7 Not long after the 1986 second appearance of the Bride, I painted a portrait of the artist Sherman Fleming, my friend and then collaborator in performance art. Titled *Voodoo Crawling in a Sea of Tears and Burning Brides*, the painting features Fleming with long dreadlocks, holding up a handful of photographs of brides that I had cut from a *Brides* magazine and collaged onto the painting and then, with orange and yellow oil paint, set aflame. In the upper right corner of the painting, a woman with her eyes rolled back in a vodun trance crawls out of a dark psychic space through the door opened by Legba, the god who controls entry to the light.



3

3 Bruce and Jean Conner with Kristine Stiles as "The Bride of Bruce Conner, Assembled" at the opening of *Bruce Conner: Selected Works (with Photographs), 1959–1978*, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, 1986. Photograph by Edmund Shea. Kristine Stiles promised gift to the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University

Only one photograph records a significant undercurrent at the opening: the Bride unites Jean and Bruce by pulling up her skirt to draw them together awkwardly under its hem; her arms are draped around the uncomfortable couple while she, distracted, chats with someone nearby. Jean's penetrating gaze registers her uneasiness and distrust of the entire situation (fig. 3). Jean explained three decades later that she had "no idea why a wedding dress" or "a folding [lawn] chair" was part of the evening, but that she had "learned early on not to comment or ask questions about his crazy ideas." Then she added: "I was a bit upset when he bought you a wedding bouquet. I don't recall that he ever gave me a bouquet though he did sometimes give me a corsage."[8] That Jean recalled so many years later her husband's insensitivity to her longing for a bouquet suggests that the second appearance of the Bride in 1986 only renewed the sting of the first in 1983, since upon both occasions Bruce bought the Bride flowers. Adding insult to injury, the Bride received the bouquet as a mere prop, enhancing a caper in which she gleefully participated.

Bruce gave me duplicate prints of Shea's photographs, and I consigned them to my archive as well. His comment as he handed me the prints still burns in my memory. He insinuated that I would probably use them sometime in the future to claim that I had done "a performance," a word he uttered with the disdain he displayed when talking of my dissertation research on and interest in Body and Performance art, a medium for which he seemed to have little regard. Such displays of aggression and hostility toward me and others were familiar.[9] But to be accused of eventually misrepresenting, as a work of art, what had been little more than a lark was a wounding insult. Not then, nor now, did I ever consider "Bride of the Angels" and "The Bride of Bruce Conner, Assembled" to be "performances" or works of art. I merely walked around in a wedding dress at two openings. Both occasions were indicative of a performativity that Bruce brought to many situations and that I sometimes helped him to realize.[10]

Nine years later, in June of 1995, Bruce sent me the following letter that reveals something of his motives and intentions in conceiving the "Bride of the Angels":

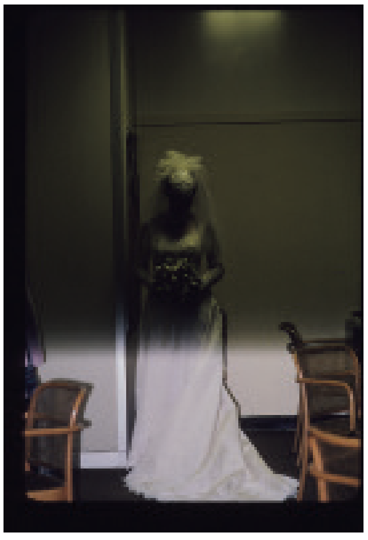
8 Jean Conner, email to the author, Mar. 27, 2015, Stiles Collection.

9 I was seldom a passive participant in such behavior. One day Conner asked me to make him coffee and asked if I knew how. "Of course!" I replied. Then he asked if I knew how to make coffee in *his* coffeepot. "Of course!" Then, predictably, I broke the coffeepot. He sent me on a long trip down the hill from his home to Macy's to buy a new one. When I returned, he asked if I had inspected the box before buying it. "No. It's sealed," I said. He opened the box, found a part missing, and sent me back. After returning from my second trip, and finding the pot in order, I made him a cup of coffee. When he had it in hand, I said to him, "I quit, you son of a bitch. You will never treat me like this again." Conner started to shake, apologized, explained that he had been drinking, and asked me not to resign. I agreed. But I left that day and did not come back for a few weeks.

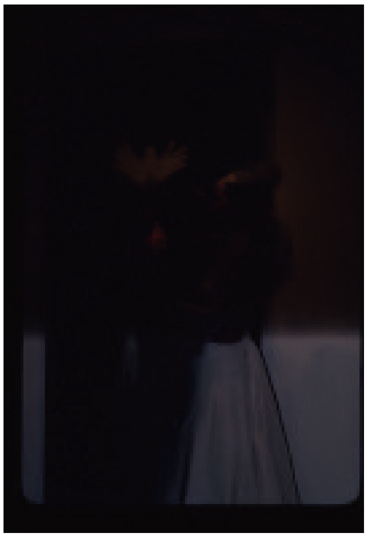
10 I have written elsewhere that it was not a "performance" on the evening in San Francisco in 1976 when Lynn Hershman Leeson asked me to accompany her on a round of art openings, dressed as her persona *Roberta Breitmore*. Neither Lynn nor I ever considered me to be a "*Roberta* multiple." Lynn hatched her concept of multiples nearly two years later. Bruce and Lynn were friends and he may have borrowed from Lynn her idea for having me appear at his gallery opening. For photographs of the evening of me as *Roberta Breitmore*, see the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection: http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=147317.



4



5



6

4–5 Kristine Stiles as "Bride of the Angels" at the opening of *Bruce Conner: Angels, 1973–1975*, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, 1983. Photographs by Suzanne Mailloux. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Kristine Stiles Collection

6 Bruce Conner and Kristine Stiles at the opening of *Bruce Conner: Angels, 1973–1975*, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, 1983. Photograph by Suzanne Mailloux. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Kristine Stiles Collection

> Dear Kristine,
>
> The wind and rain was more than many trees could survive in SF this spring. Here is a photo of one downed in front of the Japanese Tea Garden. But the flowers have been greater than ever this year.
>
> Halfway through the roll of film, I decided to photograph EL ANGEL (a collage made in Mexico). History repeats itself and angels [cannot] be always made whole again when it's time for curtains. My camera malfunctioned just like the one at the *Angel* show with the Bride of the Angels. Never yet a full length portrait of the pair.
>
> —Bruce[11]

11 Bruce Conner, letter to the author, June 1995, Stiles Collection.

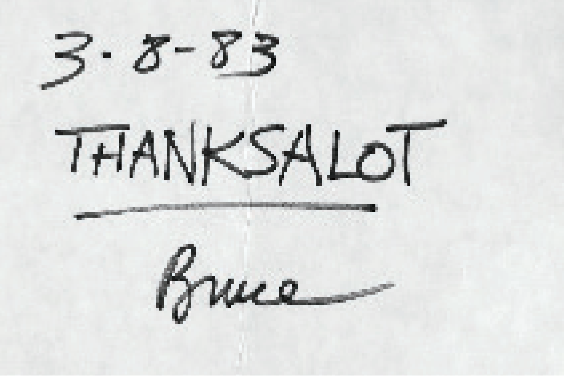
The poignancy of the last paragraph, together with Bruce's declining health, was painful. I stored the letter with the shuttered half images of 1983, only to revisit them with a critical eye in 2015.

Here is what I found: A clear photograph of the Bride shows her in a modest, high-neck, long-sleeved, elegant gown of Alençon lace bedecked in seed pearls (fig. 4). Her veil, draped in scallops of pearls, demurely covers her face. This is not the bawdy gown of 1986 but the requested "full bridal dress" befitting angels. Neither is she the raucous "Bride of Bruce Conner, Assembled" but a specter moving among shadows, lips parted, eyes intensely cast on someone in the space. A second, even darker photograph with a more pronounced split image, arrests

Bruce with flushed face and brow slightly knit. His eyes, with a steady powerful gaze, absorb someone completely obscured by the divided image. He wears a well-tailored beige suit with a red-and-black tie as if dressed for a wedding. He stands with this person before ANGEL KISS (1975, pl. 132), clearly identifiable by the odd shape of light immediately to the left of his ear. The gallery floodlight in the upper left corner reveals the contour of the ANGEL photogram, but his body blocks the rest of the image. A third photograph finds the Bride and Bruce facing each other, standing close together, separated only by the bridal bouquet in an ambiguous space of conjured phantoms, the residue of a fairy tale about a Bride and an Angel. Two photographs complete this narrative. The first is of the Bride seen in "full length," standing alone at the edge of the party among scattered chairs (fig. 5). Light illuminates the gathered net at the crown of her veil, transforming it into a semblance of Bruce's hands at the very same height in BLESSING ANGEL (1975, pl. 255). In the final, darkest, and least visible of the photographs, the Bride and Bruce appear in full length. All that can be seen is the contour of the white silk skirt of the bridal gown; the Bride's profile dimly beneath the crown of her veil; Bruce's arm around her waist and her hand over his shoulder (fig. 6). Hovering above the pair is BUTTERFLY ANGEL. The angel's hands are open in the position of a butterfly's wings, long a symbol of death, rebirth, and the freedom of the departed soul.

This is not the full-length photograph that Bruce sought of the Bride with an ANGEL. Neither are angels being "made whole again," as he wrote in his melancholic letter of 1995. Rather, like an apparition in a vague dream, the unexpected half-shuttered image, rediscovered seven years after his death in 2008, fulfills his wish by other means. The hands that encircle the Bride's waist are those illuminated dimly in the photogram before which the Bride and Bruce stand, his corporeal being metonymically connecting her with an ANGEL to realize "Bride of the Angels."

Before closing the box with these photographs in 2015, I found another object that I received from Bruce in the mail after arriving home that night in 1983, this short note with a check for fifty dollars:



7

7 Note from Bruce Conner to Kristine Stiles following the opening of *Bruce Conner: Angels, 1973–1975*, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, 1983. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Kristine Stiles Collection

II.
A VISITOR

When asked by the artist Chuck Hudina to comment on the "'subversive' element" in his work, Conner laughed and replied, "Nonsense. I'm just a visitor, that's all. You know, when you visit a foreign country you notice things that the natives don't pay much attention to."[12] Conner's response is related to another comment he made in an interview with the San Francisco punk magazine *Damage:*

> I've never really felt that I've been that much in control of what a work is. I don't see [it] as being something I make. I see it as an event. I see it as a process, and somewhere in the midst of the process it becomes a movie, or it becomes a party at the Deaf Club, or a trip to the canyons of Arizona. It becomes a broken rib at the Mabuhay.[13]

In the Hudina interview, Conner emphasized how he attended to familiar objects and behaviors in order to uncover the unusual within the commonplace that normally eludes examination. Conner could be said to have understood that, when observed from the distance afforded by his critical gaze, everyday things and events divulged something of what Immanuel Kant described in *The Critique of Judgment* as the "supersensible . . . a transcendental principle of the purposiveness of nature."[14] At the very least, such a revelation of Platonic noumena—the events and concepts of mind beyond either the physical senses or phenomena—was what Conner sought through a performative vision that disclosed and actuated the quotidian. Related to these observations, in his response to *Damage,* Conner described the very kinds of actions that set a chain of occurrences in motion to make something happen.[15] Obsessed with activating whatever drew his attention, Conner unleashed an interplay that captured the ambiguity, yet similarity and irreconcilable difference, among things, appearances, and events, especially in his own self-presentations and in the way he staged others'.[16] Such acts have the agency to turn subjectivity into an object with the capacity to represent the fluidity of identity, as Judith Butler has articulated about the functions of performativity.[17]

Conner was a master of the metaphysics of performativity at the intersection of art and philosophy—not theater, as has been suggested.[18] Over time, he performed various identities, including posing in 1964 on the beach in Malibu, California, dressed in suit and tie and accompanied by the singer Toni Basil and the actress Teri Garr (in hip 1960s dress) and two *Hullabaloo* dancers (in bikinis). The same year, a photograph by Dennis Hopper shows Conner lounging in a bathtub drinking a beer, apparently naked as he holds a leg high out of the water, while Basil, Garr, and the actress Ann Marshall, all seductively clad in underwear,

12 Chuck Hudina, "Visitor in the World: Bruce Conner Interviewed," *Release Print* 9, no. 1 (Mar. 1986): 10.

13 Bruce Conner in Mia Culpa, "Bruce Conner," *Damage* 1, no. 2 (Aug.–Sep. 1979): 8. See also "Bruce Conner: Part Two," *Damage* 1, no. 4 (Jan. 1980): 6–8.

14 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, ed. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987, 406; first published as *Kritik der Urteilskraft* in Germany in 1790).

15 Acts that "make something happen" is how J. L. Austin initially described the performative. See Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

16 Such attention to ambiguity and fluidity recalls Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*, or that which prevents meaning from ever completely being realized, especially as it is in Austinian performative utterances. For Derrida's address to Austin's performativity, see "Signature, Événement, Contexte," in *Marges—de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 365–93. See also Derrida, *L'écriture et la difference* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967); and *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967).

17 Judith Butler explains: "[T]here is also a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution that takes the social agent as an *object* rather than the subject of constitutive acts" [Butler's emphasis]. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (Dec. 1988): 519.

18 Kevin Hatch writes, "Conner himself would later state straightforwardly of his assemblage, 'It has to do with the theater.'" Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 35. However, Hatch inaccurately attributes Conner's comment to his interview with Paul Cummings (Apr. 16, 1973) in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. The quote is actually to be found in Conner's interview with Paul Karlstrom (Aug. 12, 1974) also in the Archives of American Art. Significantly, when the conversation turns to painting and collage, Conner very explicitly describes his use of the term "theater" in a very different context from that which Hatch interprets. Conner said: "It has to do with theater. Theater in the sense of an image, an environment that's made privately. Somebody makes an altar in their house, or they set up objects on tables, or they organize objects in windows (like a real theater with curtains). A church is another kind of theater; a museum is another kind of theater. . . . I'm always dealing with what's happening within that space."


8

8 Dennis Hopper, *Bruce Conner with Toni Basil, Teri Garr, and Ann Marshall,* 1964. Gelatin silver print, 13 ¼ × 9 ⅛ in. (33.7 × 23.2 cm). The Art of Emprise, Emprise Bank, Wichita, Kansas

surround him in the bathroom (fig. 8). He appears in another photo in a suit and tie, wearing the round glasses of an intellectual and standing with his arms around the same women in a different version of the Malibu beach shot (fig. 9). Behind him a sign reads suggestively: "Bruce Conner's PHYSICAL SERVICES DEPTS FOR MEN & WOMEN."

When he ran for supervisor in San Francisco in 1967, Conner's campaign poster performatively presented him in his baby picture (pl. 87). In a commission from Samuel Goldwyn Studios, for a publicity stunt to promote a new Peter Sellers movie, Conner holds a can of paint and a brush (as in Hans Namuth's pictures of Jackson Pollock painting a canvas on the floor of his studio) and decorates an elephant, symbol of the Republican party that he mocked with a geometric, psychedelic pattern and the word *LOVE.* In 1973 Edmund Shea captured Conner with Hopper, each artist sitting in a chair with the other's name on it at Conner's *Dennis Hopper One Man Show,* an exhibition of works in which Conner staged his art in Hopper's name (p. 318). In Mimi Jacobs's remarkable 1975 portrait of the artist, Conner is dressed in a denim shirt, his eyes fixed on the camera as he holds his palms together at chest level in the gesture of a Buddhist mudra, the performativity of reverence that symbolizes the unity of body and mind that is also a monk's salutation. Behind him is a unique mandala drawing that he created and turned into an offset lithograph poster advertising Anna Halprin's San Francisco Dancers' Workshop (p. 126).

By 1979–80 he is a punk leaping into the air, and a businessman in a pinstripe suit with a huge pair of pliers pinching his nose, both images in *Damage.* Materializing as "BOMBHEAD" in 1989, he again wears a shirt, tie, and jacket, but this time the jacket resembles a 1940s German military uniform (pl. 179). His neck and head disappear under a collage of the image of the funnel and mushroom cloud of the 1946 underwater nuclear bomb test at Bikini Atoll, the dramatic icon he repeated continually in his 1976 film CROSSROADS (pl. 125). Conner's



9

9 Dennis Hopper, *Bruce Conner's Physical Services*, 1964. Gelatin silver print, 9 ¼ × 13 ¼ in. (23.5 × 33.7 cm). The Art of Emprise, Emprise Bank, Wichita, Kansas

performative identity increasingly assumes that of the sage in the 1990s: an elder statesman with lips firmly sealed but piercing eyes holding the gaze of viewers even as he sees into and through them. In June 2004, four years before his death, Conner appears at the CineVegas Film Festival wearing the cowboy hat that he also dons in another compelling photograph of the 2000s. In the latter picture, he is dressed all in tones of white, cream, and beige, as if an extension of his own blondish, brown, gray beard. His hands, in white gloves, gesture with uncustomary animation, the performativity of the Kansas cowboy magician, or as the poet Steven Fama described him, "The Artist as Prestidigitator," someone skilled at sleight of hand.[19]

It was Conner who, at twelve years old, had a "magic apparatus," although he was "not a magic performer," he wrote.[20] Conner "loved to watch the shows of magic . . . Blackstone, Thurston, Dante (big stage shows) and others," but concluded:

> [I was] more interested in the boxes, tubes, deceptions, silks, cards, etc., and their mechanisms and means of creating illusion. I was too awkward and shy when trying to perform the tricks to succeed at using them. How to make a light bulb light up in your hand, make coins appear and disappear, turn paper into real money, change a handkerchief into a cane, mind[-]reading systems, creating spirit cabinets for séances[,] etc. All show business, like movies, like theater, like artworks.[21]

While Conner worked in three of these genres (movies, theater, and artworks), each remaining discrete even as it intersected with the others, his performativity existed in infinite variation in his singular being, knowing, and doing. Still, most of the time, he lived an ordinary life. He conformed to many of the values of his Kansas upbringing of the 1930s and 1940s, even as he resisted the conventions that bedeviled and tortured his remarkable talent and intelligence. By resorting to performativity, which allowed him to engage in extroverted actions uncoupled from his introverted imagination, Conner was able to unhook cause and effect from normative worldly meaning.[22] In this regard, the poet Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore accurately described him as someone "who seemed to be one of those souls who was kind of everywhere and nowhere."[23] Conner conducted his life between two worlds. He was a visitor, like a Bride or an Angel.

19 Steven Fama, "Bruce Conner . . . an In-the-News Roundup," *The Glade of Theoric Ornithic Hermetica*, Dec. 4, 2010. See http://stevenfama.blogspot.com/2010/12/bruce-conner.html.

20 Bruce Conner, letter to the author, Feb. 21, 1998, Stiles Collection.

21 Ibid.

22 I borrowed a discussion of the function of performativity here from Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's introduction to their edited collection, *Performativity and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2.

23 Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore, "On Bruce Conner (May He Rest in Peace) and Assorted Kansan Cohorts: A Memorial and Memory Lane Meditation," *WWW Virtual Library*, 2008. See http://www.vlib.us/beats/bconnermemorial.html.


HOPPER
CONNER

Rudolf Frieling

BRUCE CONNER'S CH-CH-CH-CHANGES

A change of mind, a mood, or a burst of anger can be the end of an artwork, causing it to be discarded, shredded, trashed—nothing unusual in the creative process, in which trial and error, sketches, drafts, prototypes, rough cuts, and edits are the norm. Not all first attempts at giving form to an idea hold up to scrutiny. Bruce Conner threw away art and made art out of what others had discarded; he not only was prone to dramatic gestures of destruction, but also produced, performed, archived, and gave away works in many different versions. Things were final, until they weren't. Works were temporary, as was his identity. Conner once greeted his friend Stan Brakhage by saying, "Hello, how do you do? I'm Stan Brakhage."[1]

Conner struggled in many ways against being defined by a "persona" and a unique artistic position. One way was not to defend his position at all, simply to change his identity repeatedly, in acts that mirrored the concepts of seriality and variability in his art.[2] When a gallery required him to attend a party in the 1960s, he brought buttons reading "I AM BRUCE CONNER" to be distributed to as many guests as possible. Speaking of himself in the third person, he claimed at a lecture in 1979:

> In 1963, when Bruce Conner was made aware of the existence of other Bruce Conners in the U.S., he embarked on a journey "to pursue my identity" by researching the telephone directories of major cities in the U.S. looking for "Bruce Conner." [He] intended to have a convention of Bruce Conner, where all of the Bruce Conners of the world would be invited. In front of the hotel, there would be a big sign—"WELCOME BRUCE CONNER." There would be a dinner and a program. Each person would have an identifying card so you would know who that person was. Each card would say—"Hello, My Name Is Bruce Conner." And of course the leading speaker would be Bruce Conner. He would be introduced by Bruce Conner and the audience would be Bruce Conner.[3]

Bruce Conner with Dennis Hopper at James Willis Gallery, San Francisco, 1973. Photograph by Edmund Shea. Collection of James Johnson and Barbara Odevseff

1 Bruce Conner quoted in Stan Brakhage, "Bruce Conner," manuscript of lecture at the Art Institute of Chicago, Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereafter cited as BCP).

2 For a more detailed analysis of Conner's many attempts at eschewing the pitfalls of biography and ego, see Joan Rothfuss, "Escape Artist," in *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II*, exh. cat., ed. Peter Boswell, Bruce Jenkins, and Rothfuss (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 159–83.

3 Bruce Conner, transcript of lecture at the American Culture Center, Tokyo, Oct. 2, 1979, BCP.

For this convention project, he added to the earlier “I AM BRUCE CONNER” button with a corresponding “I AM NOT BRUCE CONNER” pin (p. 90). Conner’s iconoclasm and his fight against an artistic persona ironically ended up producing even more iconic references to Bruce Conner.

Being anonymous, or being represented by a different person altogether, gave form and meaning to Conner’s sense of collaboration and public recognition, allowing the work or gesture to speak for itself. As early as 1958 he claimed that he was a “factory,”[4] and so it followed almost logically that he later represented other artists: Anonymous, Anonymouse, Emily Feather, Justin Kase, Diogenes Lucero, and so on. “These are associates of mine,” he said. “They are not personae. They are true entities.”[5] On the surface, this play with identity critiqued the status of the artist—fetishized, marketable, controllable—and the rules and structures of the art world. By creating a constant sense of instability, though, Conner’s interventions into the domain of facts and records (replacing names with thumbprints, doubling signatures, changing names) constituted not only conceptual or gestural acts but theatrical devices in the total environment of his life as an artist. They point to a deeply rooted need to challenge authority and positions of power, to switch sides, to sidestep the pressure of expectations. The most extreme action by this “escape artist,” as Joan Rothfuss called him in 1999,[6] was his announcement of an exhibition by “the late Bruce Conner” at San Francisco’s Spatsa Gallery in 1959. Miraculously, his death was temporary, but it was pronounced with authority, and it suggests not so much an escape as an anarchic fight against power. This embrace of instability also profoundly affected his relationships with friends, colleagues, collectors, and the public at large.

AUTHORIZED ART

> *The bearer of this card is authorized to alter any collage or assemblage made by Bruce Conner which is displayed for public consumption.*[7]

With the rise of Conceptual art, authorization of a work by the artist became increasingly important. The critique of authoritarian structures, a practice later coined “institutional critique,” was a corresponding strategy for many artists who came to prominence in the 1960s. Although he never fit into the category of a conceptual artist, Conner often displayed a strong conceptual framework, and he found himself time and again stranded in painful opposition to major institutions. His authorization of others, or even himself, to change a work “displayed for public consumption,” as the quote above suggests, constituted a fundamental challenge to

4 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Paul Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. See also the longer passage from this interview later in this essay.

5 Bruce Conner in “In Conversation: Bruce Conner with John Yau,” *Brooklyn Rail*, Nov. 1, 2004.

6 Rothfuss titled her essay in the catalogue accompanying the 1999 Walker Art Center exhibition on Conner “Escape Artist” (see note 2).

7 Bruce Conner, verso of a printed card with “Please Touch” on the front (see p. 305).

the way art is objectified in private and public institutions. Conner's logical and radical conclusion, given that "only *authorized* works are allowed" in a museum,[8] was that he was the ultimate authority on Bruce Conner works at all times, not just at the moment of production.

The disruptive nature of this position is evidenced in a letter from Conner to Henry Hopkins, then director of the San Francisco Museum of Art (now San Francisco Museum of Modern Art):

> The concept of change is basic to many of these [assemblage] works which I made before 1964. To accept the concept as part of the value of exhibiting the work and to forbid the artist to continue to participate in the basic aesthetic intent is a paradox I find hard to rationalize. If you accept these works at their face value and convey this to other people as an aesthetic concern intended by the artist, then why do you propose to accept all the changes and alterations of the past through the hands of warehousemen, vandals, ignorant manipulation, gravity, humidity, fire, conservation lab, etc. and refuse to accept the participation of the artist himself? . . . The laws of the works themselves will continue to apply notwithstanding. You could expect me to continue to take real action to see that those laws are not negated by any "authority."[9]

To claim that the artist's authority overrules ownership as a matter of principle is a tough proposition in a strictly capitalist society, and museums simply could not accept this radical concept of change as part of a work's artistic intent. Or they preferred not to go down that slippery slope, despite Conner's offer to stay involved and guide them—his "full service warranty"—as he proposed in a letter to Kirk Varnedoe, then a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In the same letter, Conner emphatically embraced the troubled history of the damaged assemblage CHILD (1959, pl. 50) by claiming: "The sculpture looks better to me now than it has in 25 years."[10] Change could go either way, in his view, for the worse or for the better, but museums, not surprisingly, acted on the premise that they owned a historic object that had to stay the same for continuity and historical accuracy.[11] With film and video works, however, an artist's studio often retains the right to control any migration of formats and to replace previous exhibition copies in the museum's collection, which translates to nothing other than a "full service warranty." One cannot help but wonder why Conner's urgent plea for close attention to his concept of engagement could resonate with individuals but often fell on deaf ears institutionally.

Conner's libertarian and antiauthoritarian battles with institutions are only one side of his story. Despite his legendary fight for control over his own work, he was also fervently generous with other partisans of the art world. He gave away many works or exchanged them with passionate collectors, friends, and collaborators.[12] But these gifts came with strings attached.

8 See Rachel Federman, "Bruce Conner: Fifty Years in Show Business—A Narrative Chronology," in this volume.

9 Letter from Bruce Conner to Henry T. Hopkins, July 27, 1977, SFMOMA Archives.

10 "The concept of change and my perpetual participation in the change was part of my philosophy in the films, sculptures, assemblages, etc., that I was creating in the late 1950s through the 1960s. They include a full service warranty on my part to continue the creative process." Letter from Bruce Conner to Kirk Varnedoe, May 12, 2001, BCP. On the history of CHILD, see Roger Griffith and Megan Randall, "The Life, Death, and Resurrection of Bruce Conner's CHILD," in this volume.

11 A contemporary approach is, for example, Tino Sehgal's selling of performative works to collecting institutions by stipulating that only the artist or an authorized representative can instruct participants. "Authorization" is, in fact, at the core of his artistic concept of selling immaterial "situations," as he coins his practice. Another example is Bay Area artist Barry McGee, whose large-scale mosaic of small picture frames, *Untitled* (2009), in SFMOMA's collection, is installed differently each time it is presented, based on the artist's interpretation of an exhibition site.

12 Marcel Duchamp's practice of gifting readymades to friends resonates with Conner's habit of mailing small, unsigned works, often anonymously, to select people, among them Ray Johnson, an activist of mail art: "At the time my relationship to my work was that people who would become involved enough in the work to actually touch these collages and assemblages had to be emotionally or conceptually involved to a point where they were like participants." Bruce Conner quoted in Kevin Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 100. On his practice of mailing art, see Anastasia Aukeman, "The Rat Bastard Protective Association: Bruce Conner and His San Francisco Cohort, 1958–68" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2013), 115. See also her *Welcome to Painterland: Bruce Conner and the Rat Bastard Protective Association* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).



1

1 Bruce Conner in his San Francisco studio, 1959. Photograph by Jerry Burchard. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

Conner constantly challenged the metrics and economic conditions of art through his own regimen of authoritarian rules, even sometimes provoking the work's destruction. After all, the world of the 1950s and 1960s was permeated by a sense of doom and termination following the experience of the atomic bomb. In a letter to his friend Michael McClure in 1965, Conner proposed the demolition of a work as an aesthetic strategy for an upcoming exhibition at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University near Boston: "I will show BOMB (assemblage) in the show and every day take a part of it and put it in trash can until it is totally disassembled and returned to trash."[13] Whether any dismantling took place over the course of the exhibition is not documented; however, Conner later discarded this work for reasons unknown, and we can only speculate whether it was in reaction to the fact that the world would not embrace changes and processes of entropy to keep it "alive."[14]

Most museums still limit the creative process to the sphere of production that precedes acquisition.[15] Yet change happens even after a contemporary artwork enters a collection. Today we are not only talking about objects that change over time due to their materiality—fading photographs, for example—but also about participation and public interaction built into the concept of a work, which Conner actively promoted in his art. His works consistently addressed questions that have been fundamental to contemporary art since the 1960s: Who owns a work and gets to make decisions about it, and what is the responsibility of ownership? When a work involves an ongoing process, how can the work's continuity be maintained? And how and where can changes, revisions, and remixes become a process of ongoing production not just for the artist but for the public as well? According to Conner, the latter can only take place when the collector, the museum, the audience, and the public at large become passionately involved—when they become players in a theater of aesthetic events and, in Conner's case, occasional disasters.

13 Letter from Bruce Conner to Michael McClure, Mar. 11, 1965, BCP.

14 The exhibition's curator, Thomas Garver, does not recall any changes taking place. Garver, email to the author, Aug. 6, 2015. An assemblage as a locus for public intervention was one of the consequences that the artist and museums had to respond to. Garver recalls that NO BABY (n.d.), which he now owns, "originally had several 1930s black-and-white pornographic photos tucked into the folds of the nylon fabric. These were apparently stolen when the piece was at the Alan Gallery and a couple of plumbers came into the storage area to do some work and helped themselves." See also Greil Marcus's interpretation of Conner's philosophy of works as "alive" in his essay, "Bruce Conner's BLACK DAHLIA," in this volume.

15 For a more detailed discussion of the shift in today's museums embracing an often collaborative, participatory, and instruction-based collection, see my text "The Museum as Producer," in *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: Seventy-Five Years of Looking Forward*, ed. Corey Keller, Sarah Roberts, and Janet Bishop (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2009).

ANOTHER CONFIGURATION

One of the earliest photographs of Conner in his studio shows him working on a suspended assemblage, attaching parts to its front and back (fig. 1). Objects are stacked about the studio, either randomly placed or discarded; it's hard to know which. Only time would tell which configurations would materialize as "works" and what would be left disassembled. At the center of this ongoing construction and deconstruction we find the artist himself, not unlike the stereotypical computer programmer in a Silicon Valley garage.[16]

Taken in 1959, the photo is an early indication of Conner's theatricality. The studio, or the museum or gallery exhibition, was a kind of theater for Conner, with scores, scripts, and temporary actions, as is evident in the following recollection of an interaction with his gallerist Charles Alan:

> I remember I went to the Alan Gallery in 1963. I had a cardboard box, which had eight or nine objects in it. I said, "This is a new work." He said, "What do you do with it?" I said, "That's it. It's that box." "You mean, you exhibit the box?" I said, "You can if you want to. Or you can take them all out and put them all over the room, or put them in your pocket and walk home, or go to the movie, or put them on a shelf. But you have to remember that they all go together.[17]

The objects could either be formalized as "sculpture" or activated as a set of props for an action performed individually; they "went together" either as a temporal assemblage or as an ensemble in a theater, creating temporal freeze frames or tableaux. And then, of course, they might simply be returned to the box, like chess pieces without the board, with its grid and rules.[18] From this perspective, it is not a coincidence that some of Conner's early assemblages had straps so that they could be carried around: "I carried the CHILD on my shoulders around the City Hall in San Francisco in protest against the unnecessary and brutal beating of students, the day before when the Unamerican activities committee was there, by the police."[19] These participatory concepts and performative actions point to Conner's activist concept of art: their ultimate purpose was to affect others and instigate an active response. Passivity was not an option.

Not only did Conner himself and his ensemble of objects perform, but he also engaged collectors to perform by responding to objects' processes.[20] When his HOMAGE TO JOAN BROWN (ca. 1962) began to slowly fall apart, he suggested mounting it with a Plexiglas wall several feet in front of the work so that objects could fall at will and their positions could be documented. He said: "Sooner or later it was all going to come apart. I decided that it was

16 In 1963 Nam June Paik would translate a similar fusion of lab/studio and exhibition into his rooms for thirteen TV sets scattered everywhere in *Exposition for Music—Electronic Television* at Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, Germany. The ideas, collages, and processes of Paik, as well as the entire Fluxus group, were close in spirit to Conner's earlier works in terms of sculptures that could be activated.

17 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Paul Karlstrom in 1974, quoted in Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner*, 238.

18 Other contemporaries of Conner, like Robert Morris, had also begun to work on processual installations and sets of instructions. Morris had, for example, stipulated that his ensemble of materials and forms of *Scatter Piece* (1968–69) could be exhibited in any way, including stacking it away in storage, and it would still be a valid form.

19 See Federman, "Bruce Conner: Fifty Years in Show Business—A Narrative Chronology," in this volume.

20 Thomas Garver believes that a piece he "contributed" to LOOKING GLASS (1964, pl. 27) is no longer part of the work. Garver, email to the author, Aug. 5, 2015.



2



3

2–3 SUPERHUMAN DEVOTION, 1959; no longer extant; photographed in two states. Left: in the artist's studio; right: on the cover of Philip Lamantia's *Destroyed Works* (San Francisco: Auerhahn, 1962)

already an event. . . . But he [the collector Morton Neumann] said, 'No, I'm not going to do that. I want it back the way it was originally.' So I have no idea what really happened after that point."[21] Conner refused to participate if the owner wouldn't accept the artist's authority, literally giving up on a work: "My attitude to the work in 1964 was that I didn't want to glue the world down anymore. So pieces were tied, pinned, or an object was placed in relation to another with no pre-ordained pattern. I value music, dance, painting, and collage that offers creative participation."[22] While Conner made these remarks often with specific reference to his work in the 1950s and 1960s, this concept runs much deeper in his entire body of work, resurfacing more directly again in the last decade of his life. But this was not what would be called "audience engagement" in today's terminology; quite the opposite. Conner favored a Cagean indeterminate participation, an open field of events that would highlight the context and its implicit or explicit rules. He said, "When the museums and teachers got hold of the concept of 'audience participation,' it became more like a nursery school activity. . . . You would be given instructions on how to be interactive."[23] The irony that Conner had in fact told collectors of his early work how to be "interactive" was lost on him. Instructions belonged to the domain of the artist, not the owner—whether that was a private collector or a public institution with its own rules of governance, due diligence, and so on. When a work is essentially an ensemble of unrelated parts, as Conner himself claimed, things can easily be added or taken away without destroying the aesthetic or conceptual frame. What he asked, however, was something akin to a creative act, an homage to the artist through an act of sensitive engagement: the public needed to respond and ideally surprise the artist, who would, ultimately, retain authorial control, possibly accepting or rejecting a change—my art, my rules.

21 Bruce Conner quoted in interview with Will Shank and Rosa Lowinger for an unpublished book on conservation, undated (winter 2001–2), SFMOMA Archives.

22 Bruce Conner in Lynn Hershman, "Bruce Conner Casts a Jaundiced Eye at the Art World" (interview), 1984, BCP.

23 Bruce Conner in Hans Ulrich Obrist and Gunnar B. Kvaran, "Interview: Bruce Conner," *Domus*, no. 885 (Oct. 2005).



4



5

4–5 Anonymous, HOMAGE TO JAY DEFEO, 1991; photographed in 2011 and 2016

AN ACTIVIST OF ENTROPY

For Conner, making a work, too, was an outcome of entropy or intentional destruction, or a combination of the two.[24] What began as a simple artistic response to a complete absence of marketability[25] gradually developed into a consistent and sustained approach. The fading of materials and the accumulation of dust over time became key components in Conner's practice, so that dusting an assemblage was deemed an inappropriate act of "conservation." The vulnerability of the fading and precarious materials in his work—nylon stockings being the most vivid example—not only implied a gradual falling apart, but the notion that consciously triggered destructive events were inherent to the work. When two assemblages arrived at the Charles Alan Gallery in New York damaged, Conner commented: "I expected SUPERHUMAN DEVOTION to fall apart. . . . The other one (DEATHSONG) was cracked purposely before it was sent" (figs. 2–3).[26] In 1980 Conner gave an untitled light-sensitive felt-tip pen drawing as a wedding gift to the art historian Kristine Stiles, then a graduate student and his assistant. He instructed her to hang the drawing in direct sunlight and told her that it would last as long as her marriage, of which he disapproved. In an effort to preserve the drawing, Stiles did not follow his instructions. When he saw the drawing in the early 1990s, though, Conner commented to her: "I was right. The drawing would have completely faded by the time your marriage ended."[27]

When objects fade, they perform over time, but they do so in an ultimately unpredictable way. The final form of a work was thus often dictated by external events rather than the artist's aesthetic satisfaction. In 2007, after Anonymous's painting HOMAGE TO JAY DEFEO (1991) failed to sell during an exhibition at Gallery Paule Anglim in San Francisco, Conner responded by lending it to a friend with these written instructions:

24 Two works were "depth charged," one into the waters off the East Coast (SUPERHUMAN DEVOTION) and the other off the West Coast (BOMB); see Aukeman, "The Rat Bastard Protective Association," 141, and Rachel Federman, "Bruce Conner: Fifty Years in Show Business—A Narrative Chronology," in this volume.

25 "The materials that we used were not permanent many times because there was no concept of these works being merchandise. Nobody was going to buy it. . . . I was working on a painting about 12 × 12 inches and it was all goopy and I was really fed up with it. I was fed up with most of my painting. I took a knife to it and slashed it. It looked like a wounded creature. I brutalized it. I bent wire through it and a rag tied in it. I stretched a nylon stocking over the whole thing. There was a picture of a cadaver on a board (a picture I had picked out of *Life* magazine) behind the nylon. I put a handle on it, so I could carry it any place that I wanted to. It became an object, a victim, but it was also an expression of the frustration and anguish of that time. It took itself not so seriously by putting a handle on it. I called it RATBASTARD." Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Peter Boswell, June 15, 1983, revised by Conner, Oct. 19, 1997, Walker Art Center Archives, Minneapolis.

26 Letter from Bruce Conner to Charles Alan, n.d. (ca. 1963?), Alan Gallery Records, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

27 Kristine Stiles, email to the author, Oct. 28, 2015.

> We have agreed that it is appropriate to hang the painting at the end of the backyard garden on the fence since it is too large for any hanging on an interior wall. You will assume only the discreet responsibilities of being sure that no untoward damage or loss will happen to the painting beyond the effect that keeping it oudoors in the sun, heat, cold, rain, and the other elements of the San Francisco weather along with the expected and various incursions of natural plants and animals. You will not be responsible for liability and insurance for this painting while it is loaned to you from me. Anonymous agrees with me on this loan to you.[28]

A true friend and worthy collaborator, the collector has not interceded, and the painting has now practically disintegrated (figs. 4–5). The permanent loss of a work was a natural event in Conner's "factory," and the death might even be actively triggered. Such was the case when the artist turned consciously to outmoded formats such as 8mm film, a material that was already "lost," having been superseded by newer and better home-movie formats, in the 1960s, when he started using it precisely for its imminent obsolescence.

THE CONNER MOVIE FACTORY

> *In 1958 I got very involved in all kinds of chemical transformations. Besides changing my environment in a lot of different ways, I was involved in theater, dance, and music. I was working on concerts with Terry Riley. We were doing parades through North Beach. I was creating paintings, drawings, assemblages, and collages. I was making sculptures and I was doing movies. I was a factory, working on my total environment.*[29]

Conner's interest in multisensory experiences led him to provide soundtracks to his exhibitions, transforming them into events. LOOKING GLASS (1964, pl. 27) originally incorporated audio recordings of a voice saying "I like you" and "Let's have a party," activated when the viewer pulled a string (an interactive feature that has not yet been restored). TICK-TOCK JELLY CLOCK COSMOTRON (1961, pl. 56) was conceived as an assemblage with a recording device that would play back comments made by the public in front of the work. When this proved too technically demanding, Conner realized a prerecorded soundtrack to play continuously as part of the work. Conner premiered MUSIC (1960, pl. 52), an assemblage whose title lets the viewer associate the visual collage with a musical score, in a concert hall in Boston[30] and subsequently envisioned a sequential exhibition presence for the work, one "nonperforming," with the black curtain closed, and one "performing," with the curtain pulled up. He imagined all kinds of possible events in relation to this "performance" when the curtain was pulled up,

28 Letter from Bruce Conner to Steven Fama, Dec. 2, 2007.

29 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Paul Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

30 "It was performed at Boston University at the end of the program [Programs for New Music]. It was placed on a music stand and unveiled. The musicians left the building and did not return. I opened the windows and doors and left. The audience left the room bit by bit. Twenty minutes later there was only one person left. He remained seated. The janitor came. He was informed that the music was not complete yet. Some ten minutes later this last member of the audience decided to leave and was unsure whether I intended to leave the MUSIC on the stand. He decided to take it with him. A week later he told me he had it. A month later he returned it to me." Bruce Conner, conservation questionnaire, May 21, 1983, SFMOMA Archives.

and wondered how a museum could allow these theatrical events within its hallowed spaces while carefully avoiding instructing the audience to perform except to lift the curtain, which, of course, a museum wouldn't allow.

In 1958, the year he announced he was working on his "total environment," Conner expanded his artistic practice to include the time-based medium of film. He assembled the found-footage film A MOVIE (pl. 9) and explored ideas around its presentation. Rather than screening it in a cinema, he initially planned to show it as a rear projection within an exhibition, only abandoning the idea for financial reasons: "I'd also wanted the film to be played in a small cube of about 10 × 10 × 10 feet that you could stand inside. And I'd wanted the lights to change and there to be tape recordings, radio programs, and television sound that would impinge aurally on the viewer at random moments. This way, the film could be viewed in a different context every time it ran."[31]

In 1973 Conner recalled the impact that Alain Resnais's film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) had on his thinking:

> Time, space, breakup, past, future, bits and parts of concepts and still photographs. Everything coming together into one concept. Thinking. Total consciousness of all you're involved in. Future expectations and past memories. Building on top of them. Things, of their own accord, start breaking in on top of it. None of the arts are totally separate. . . . At the time it's made it has that time and subsequently it's going to continue to change. Things that I've worked on I expected or even pushed them to make them change. Layers of paint that I know are going to crack.[32]

This vision of a "total consciousness" became manifest in his collaboration on light shows produced by the Family Dog at the Avalon Ballroom in San Francisco in 1967. Ben Van Meter, Conner's collaborator in the North American Ibis Alchemical Company, recalls that at the end of their frenzy of improvisations (which he likened to those of a jazz combo), they "destroyed what we had on the screen and started over again on the next set."[33]

These experiences of complex interactions in time and place are mirrored in Conner's practice of constantly editing and creating different performances of film projections (fig. 6). REPORT (1963–67, pl. 84) had eight different versions with the same frame count; MARILYN TIMES FIVE (1968–73, p. 351) existed first with three cycles, then with four. The full history of versions, prints, and changes to speed and sound are too numerous to list here, but one further example suggests how complex this history could be. Conner wrote:

31 Bruce Conner in Noel Daniel, ed., *Broken Screen: Expanding the Image, Breaking the Narrative; 26 Conversations with Doug Aitken* (New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2005), 93.

32 Conner, interview by Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973.

33 See http://www.benvanmeter.net.



6

6 Film canisters in Bruce Conner's studio, 2016

> LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS was shown in a long version in several screenings in 1961. In 1962, actually the film was shown as a complete film made before going to Mexico and it was silent 16mm. A combined film was revised from footage shot in Mexico and shown in 1963 and 1964. The entire footage was shortened to 100 ft. of 16mm and reduced down to 8mm film (50 ft.) to be shown as a Technicolor cartridge 8mm projector which projected film continuously without end, head to tail spliced with no beginning or end and shown . . . at the Rose museum, Brandeis University in 1965.[34]

In 1967 this loop version was set to the Beatles song "Tomorrow Never Knows," written mostly by John Lennon. Today LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959–67/1996, pl. 62) exists in three iterations: this short version, a longer version (with music by Terry Riley), and the silent version described by Conner, though the latter has been taken out of circulation.

Conner revisited all his filmic collages, acknowledging that "time does not alter the fact that each version was considered to be the final version when it was made."[35] One wonders why he felt the constant urge to reassemble his splices. As Conner himself stated in relation to REPORT,[36] the subject matter at hand would continue to haunt him, and each public presentation had the potential to leave him dissatisfied. In fact, he often took films out of distribution entirely for long stretches of time. Responding to his inner workings, as well as the public perception of his films, by applying changes to their materiality or temporality became a recurring motif.

How a work's material configuration (the specific film print and the qualities of the projector) affected its performance was also of concern to Conner. On the back of a cardboard container for an 8mm reel of LUKE (1967) that he gave Vivian Kurz, he wrote: "I like to run this at 5 FPS (Bolex projector) and play the beginning of side one of Miles Davis's 'Sketches of Spain.' First sound starts with first picture frame. Otherwise run it at whatever speed on a 8mm (old fashioned 8mm) projector—forward or backward. It is a film shot in Stockton, CA. when they made 'Cool Hand Luke.'"

34 Letter from Bruce Conner to Scott MacDonald, n.d., BCP.

35 Ibid.

36 See the excerpted transcript of Stan Brakhage's 1973 lecture on REPORT, in this volume.



7



8

7–8 LUKE, 1967/2004 (stills). 8mm film/digital, color, sound, 22 min. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

Over the last ten years of his life, after he decided to stop producing "new" work following his "non-retrospective" at the Walker Art Center, Conner began a last round of reviews of earlier film works, often with the patient collaboration of his editor, Michelle Silva. In LUKE (2004, figs. 7–8), he remastered the eponymous film from 1967, once again making changes to speed, length, soundtrack, and so on.[37] COSMIC RAY (1961) had already seen its fair share of reformatting in the 1960s, from a single projection to (four years later) a silent, three-screen 8mm film projection using three unsynchronized films of different lengths (COSMIC RAY #1, #2, #3) so that they could be constantly reconfigured.[38] Revisiting this concept digitally—a seminal change, given his almost orthodox rejection of film on video as late as 2001—led Conner first to a silent, unsynchronized, three-channel version titled EVE-RAY-FOREVER (1965/2006), and then to a synchronized final iteration with the soundtrack of Ray Charles's "What'd I Say" titled THREE SCREEN RAY (2006, pl. 252). This last version is the sum of his filmic oeuvre, fully exploring the nonlinear editing options of digital technology. Transferred to the format of a museum presentation—as Conner had often done in the past, though most of the time he lacked the technical or financial abilities to do so—this work, more than any other, introduced Conner to a large noncinematic audience.[39]

37 "We took that material and Patrick [Gleeson] began composing and performing the music for the film. He decided it should be slower than five frames per second. So we did some trickery with digital equipment and got it down to three frames per second. Now it is twenty-two minutes long, and it's got stereo sound, the benefit of working in digital. That is the way it will be seen. It won't be on film." "In Conversation: Bruce Conner with John Yau," *Brooklyn Rail*, Nov. 1, 2004.

38 "Cosmic Ray, though set to Charles, works equally well to a Ravi Shankar record, though in a completely different way, and the possibilities are endless. Sometimes, the process leaves no film at all—'it just doesn't resolve'—and Conner has also made several more or less private films, sometimes running them 'until they fall apart,' or giving them away to their subjects as 'portraits.'" Thomas Albright, "Meet Bruce Conner, Filmmaker," *Rolling Stone*, Mar. 9, 1968.

39 SFMOMA acquired the installation in 2009 and organized its first museum presentation in 2010 under the title *Long Play: Bruce Conner and the Singles Collection.*

PERFORMING FILM

Conner's filmic work, from his disjunctive collage of found fragments in A MOVIE to the parallel complex collages in THREE SCREEN RAY, is a continuous assault on the illusions of continuity. Conner made it his business to remind audiences of the effects on them of watching a movie in a specific time and place: "to bring the room back into place and putting YOU in the room."[40] Film as a medium and experience is performative. Conner knew this and was typically horrified by a projector, or a projectionist, performing poorly. Each event needed to be done not only to his exact specifications but done well.

What happens when a film print is owned by a private collector, though? The mode of perception changes dramatically, as viewing becomes a personal experience. In a letter to Charles Alan,[41] Conner linked holding a film print in one's hands to unfolding a Chinese scroll and the detailed attention usually reserved for painting, emphasizing the perception of frames and the ability to let the "home movie" run frame by frame in either direction. For many film works, he made the conscious decision to return to the home-movie format of regular 8mm film (an "expendable" format, as Brakhage would say in 1973[42]), reducing its size and impact to a small screen and small audience as a way to bridge the gap between projecting and scrolling. The manual handling of film is thus the equivalent of the deep time of libraries, archives, and studies. The private collector—or, by extension, the curator or museum professional—has an exclusive noncinematic access to the still images of the film, which one could call the back of the public interface of a projection. One can view a sequence of frames forward or backward or selectively look at single frames, scrutinizing details that are otherwise lost in projection and hidden from view.

Works in time-based media are essentially dependent on technical configurations. They always perform and thus always, at least to a certain degree, perform differently. Maintaining the integrity of moving images over time by allowing formatting changes to take place is a condition familiar to most museums, but one can see the implications for all media. Hard rules have softened, and artistic interventions into collection works are seriously debated and often accommodated when they serve the purpose of keeping a work "alive," or in tune with its original concept and thus generating an art- and media-historical discourse around it. Conner's works remain relevant today not only because their status is unstable, but because they address their internal law (when they expand and change physiologically) as well as their external law (of indeterminate and participatory change over time) in relation to people and contexts. The latter includes the audience in the theater of contemporary art, which stages participatory and live acts within the museum. Performances of sculptures in museum galleries—see Kevin Beasley's works with connected live microphones, for example (fig. 9)—underscore that Conner's legacy is more alive than ever.

. . .

40 Bruce Conner quoted in Warren Bass, "The Past Restructured: Bruce Conner and Others," *Journal of the University Film Association* 33, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 16.

41 Letter from Bruce Conner to Charles Alan, spring 1957, BCP.

42 See the excerpted transcript of Brakhage's 1973 lecture on REPORT, in this volume.



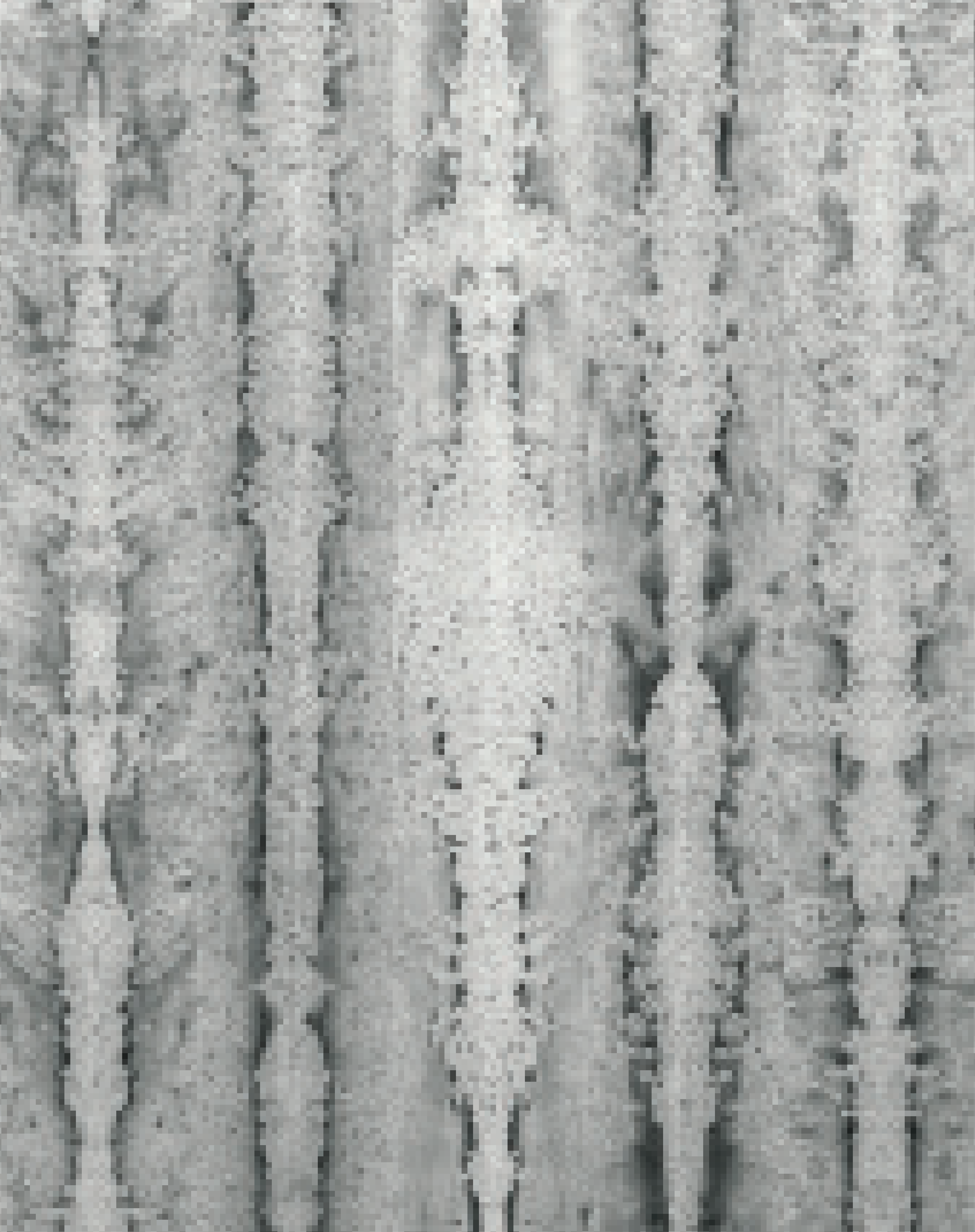
9

9 Kevin Beasley, *Strange Fruit (Pair 1)*, 2015. Nike Air Jordan 1 shoes, resin, polyurethane foam, tube socks, shoelaces, rope, speakers, hypercardioid and contact microphones, amplifiers, patch cables, and effects processors; dimensions variable. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, commissioned by the Young Collectors Council, with additional funds contributed by Josh Elkes, Younghee Kim-Wait, and Julia and Jamal Nusseibeh, 2014

> *What can I present to view but a series of acts, arts and crafts to deceive my audience with ingeniously constructed illusions? I will assume the role I desire myself to be. I will act as I am expected to act. I will also act as I am not expected to act for that is also expected by my audience and by myself. . . . I don't feel I can break from the rites and rituals because those time[s] I feel that I have done so in the past are discovered not to be liberation but one other change in the pattern. I* perform *events that I report to others. . . . I think my reports are my activities. . . . I would like to dance all the time. I wouldn't like to have to sign my name and go to banks.*[43]

43 Letter from Bruce Conner to R. Homer, Sept. 23, 1966, emphasis mine; SFMOMA Archives.

Despite the physical effects illness imposed on him from the 1980s on, Conner never lost his ability to dance, a trait so vividly recalled by many of his friends and colleagues. Conner wanted to be a presence on a public stage. And although he could be meticulous about financial transactions, he wasn't much of a banker but rather an activist of alternative economies, gift exchanges, participatory events, and personal fixations. Performing identities, reporting, dancing, and letting works become events of change—it was all temporary. Even death was temporary, until it wasn't. Conner died in 2008 after a final decade of reviewing and changing his past work one last time. Yet the performance of BRUCE CONNER hasn't stopped. We—the caretakers, the critics, the public—all constantly contribute to a process of *ch-ch-ch-changes*. Who knows, one of these days a mash-up on YouTube may remix COSMIC RAY to the music of David Bowie. It will be a completely different experience with no artist around to authorize it, but the real late Bruce Conner would hope that they would still perform "in character."



Gary Garrels

SOUL STIRRER: VISIONS AND REALITIES OF BRUCE CONNER

Bruce Conner—a man of uncompromising artistic integrity—favored paradox, complication, and complexity. With piercing observation he would read an object as literally as possible, noting how something appeared exactly to his eye, and yet he was obsessed with realities far beyond the range of the human senses.[1] Religious overtones and mystical leaps run throughout his art from its beginnings to his final work, displaying his ongoing desire to express truth as he could locate it: "My impression was that what really existed was not that thing people called 'reality.' That was unreal. So if I wanted to find truly real things and deal with them, I had to do it all by myself and use whatever tools were available to me."[2]

From an early age Conner's curiosity and sense of being an outsider were profound. He recounts a childhood memory in which his father was in the front yard and a neighbor came by and they began to talk: "Hi, Joe." "Hi, Nick." "How're you doing?" "I'm doing fine." "Great day, isn't it?" "Sure is." "Think we might get some rain?" "Could be." "How's the wife?" "Real good." "Well, gotta go now." "Well, see you." "See you." Conner said, "I was amazed . . . I was *suspicious*. I thought, kids don't talk like this! They've got to be hiding things from us! Conversations like this have to be a *code*."[3] Conner concluded that "words were weapons. I learned to distrust words. I placed my bet on vision."[4]

One particular childhood experience is vivid and revealing:

> It was when I was about eleven years old. I was in my room in the house in late afternoon. Sun was shining through the window. I was lying on the floor and I was looking out across the rug at the light on the floor. I went into a state of consciousness which I couldn't describe afterwards. I changed. I changed physically, I changed conceptually, and it took hundreds of years. I changed and grew old, through all kinds of experiences, in worlds of totally different dimensions. And then I became aware of myself being in the room. Here I am, in a room, and I'm enormously old. How can I ever get up?

1 See Conner's recounting of an early encounter with inkblots in Jack Rasmussen, "Interview: Bruce Conner, Jack Rasmussen," in *After Bruce Conner: Anonymous, Anonymouse, and Emily Feather*, exh. cat., ed. Rasmussen (Washington, D.C.: Katzen Arts Center, American University Museum, 2005), 29.

2 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Peter Boswell, Mar. 19, 1986, quoted in Boswell, "Bruce Conner: Theater of Light and Shadow," in *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II*, exh. cat., ed. Boswell, Bruce Jenkins, and Joan Rothfuss (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 39.

3 Bruce Conner quoted in Greil Marcus, "Bruce Conner: The Gnostic Strain," *Artforum* 31, no. 4 (Dec. 1992), 75.

4 Ibid.

BURNING BRIGHT, 1996 (pl. 204, detail)



1

1 CRUCIFIXION, 1957. Oil on canvas, 72 × 48 in. (182.9 × 121.9 cm). Batman Gallery Collection of Dr. Michael Agron

> I'm practically disintegrated. I'm an ancient person. My bones are falling apart. I can't move. And then I slowly become aware of the rug. I look at my hands and they're not old. I knew I was an old, ancient person, but I didn't look that way. I didn't understand what had happened and I wanted to talk to someone about it. I couldn't. There weren't words to describe the experience. The only thing I could think of saying was that it was like a dream. It wasn't a dream, but very real. It wasn't science fiction. There were so many things that were unknown secrets, that adult society knew, that they didn't let children know about. I thought this was one of them.[5]

The presence and influence of Christianity permeated Conner's youth. He would later recall that Kansas was deeply in the "Bible Belt. . . . There weren't any alternative religions or alternative lifestyles."[6] While Conner had little interest in the church his parents attended, likening it to a "country club,"[7] his friend and poet Michael McClure remembers seeing "Bruce go into a revival tent to be saved. In Wichita, Kansas, they would have revival tents in the middle of the street on certain holidays. And I've seen him go in and get saved and come out saved—laughing and enjoying himself and taking it seriously and laughing at it."[8]

Throughout his life Conner remained skeptical about the role of religion:

> There is always a conundrum, a mystery, and hocus pocus in an established religion. It is much different watching a professional magician as opposed to a priest presenting the host, and saying, "This is the flesh of Christ and blood of Christ . . . EAT AND DRINK IT?" . . . The assumption can be made either way: they are all miracles, or they are all sleight of hand. That everything may be conceived as an illusion does not exclude the concept that all illusion is reality. Any aspect of it can be considered reality or illusion. Illusion is the game we artists play (and sleight of hand as well). My view is that this confrontation with mystery exists all the time. Mystery, power, and the concept of going beyond one's corporeal reality. If you can't expand beyond your own limitations physically then it becomes attractive to expand your own limitations by way of mental process, spirituality, or mysticism. Mysticism is on display everywhere.[9]

5 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Peter Boswell, July 20, 1983, revised by Conner, Jan. 31, 1997, published in *2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II*, 23. Conner recounted the same episode in a 1990 lecture, quoted in Joan Rothfuss, "Escape Artist," in *2000 BC*, 161. Rothfuss notes that Conner only recalled this memory in 1958 when he tried peyote for the first time and realized that he was "in very familiar territory. I'd been there before."

6 Bruce Conner in Michael Kohn, "An Interview with Bruce Conner," in *Bruce Conner: Inkblot Drawings and Engraving Collages* (Los Angeles: Kohn Turner Gallery, 1997), n.p.

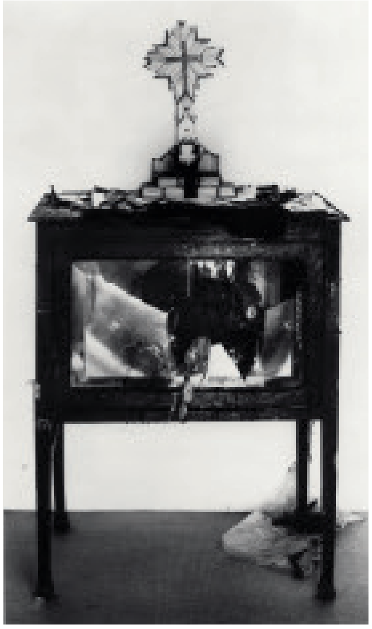
7 Jean Conner, transcript of interviews conducted by Robert Conway for the Conner Family Trust between July 15, 2013, and June 5, 2015, San Francisco, 13.

8 Michael McClure, interview conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Conner Family Trust, session 1, Oct. 13, 2011, 22.

9 Ibid., 19.



2



3

2 THE LAST SUPPER, 1960; no longer extant. Photographed by Bruce Conner and Ernie Burden in the Western Addition, San Francisco, 1960. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

3 RELIQUARY, 1964; no longer extant. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

As newlyweds, Bruce and Jean Conner moved in the fall of 1957 to San Francisco, which Conner thought would be a much more sympathetic environment than New York, with artists and writers involved with "Oriental philosophies, which would attract people who were involved in the occult or with certain types of philosophies or psychic energies that did not find an outlet elsewhere."[10] There was also an early interest in drugs such as peyote and mescaline that could alter states of consciousness. As McClure has clarified about the use of psychedelic drugs during this period in San Francisco, "We were not taking [them] to get high for fun; we were taking [them] for a new look at a new aspect of the universe, like looking out from a ship through a different porthole and seeing a different view."[11]

Christian subjects and titles recurred in Conner's work from the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s. Early drawings and prints, such as BRUNETTO LATINO (1956, pl. 8) and the series of Geryon works from the same period (see pl. 7) were inspired by Dante's *Inferno*.[12] One of his early and most ambitious paintings is titled CRUCIFIXION (1957, fig. 1). A black wax assemblage of the same name from 1960 (pl. 46) and a few other assemblages—RESURRECTION (1960, pl. 47), THE LAST SUPPER (1960 [no longer extant], fig. 2), and RELIQUARY (1964 [no longer extant], fig. 3)—also have religious and specifically Christian references. Conner has said of these works:

> Religion carries on a dialogue of relating life to death and the forces that control the world, your life, and you. These are mysteries to everyone. CRUCIFIXION I tried to make like a dead human body hung up on a stick—the intention of many of the traditional works about crucifixion. This is a universal image—virtually universal at least in Western society. And RESURRECTION is a sculpture representing an image that is decaying and growing at the same time. The process of plants and life and everything else. It comes out of the ground and goes back into the ground. I don't know how much of this is religion, but it is what you observe in the world.[13]

10 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Paul Karlstrom and Serge Guilbaut, Mar. 29, 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

11 Michael McClure, interview conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Conner Family Trust, session 2, Apr. 14, 2012, 15.

12 Brunetto Latino is a character from Canto XV and one of the most important figures in both Dante's life and his book. Geryon is a figure from Greek mythology who appears in Canto XVII. For a fuller discussion of these characters in Conner's work, see Conner in Boswell, "Bruce Conner: Theater of Light and Shadow," 67.

13 Conner, interview by Boswell, July 20, 1983.

Conner's assemblages offer a deep probe into the unconscious, and are both unsettling and spiritual. They are repulsive, sometimes ferocious, but also tender and mysterious, beguiling, luring one in to take a closer look, to marvel at their intricacies and layers. In SPIDER LADY HOUSE (1959, pl. 16), for example, the entire work could be viewed as a rendering of a vulva. The perimeter is framed in an irregular trim of slightly matted brown faux fur. What could be flesh is composed of mottled scraps of yellowed wallpaper. At the bottom, a lovely floral bouquet suggests sweet desire; hanging directly above this is a single ice skate, whose blade could stand for a *vagina dentata*. Inside a frame within the frame at the top center lurks a scarcely visible baby doll's head, hidden behind a skein of old, injured nylon stockings, a halted birth. Lust and innocence are indissolubly joined. The assemblages of these years are both defiant and vulnerable. Looking beyond the immediately visible, they are acts of transformation and transcendence.

Conner's assemblages took on a different character after he and Jean moved to Mexico City in 1961. They became flatter, more pictorial, and filled with color; they were also more lyrical and spiritual. As Peter Boswell notes, "There is evidence in the Mexican work of a gradual turn toward an emphasis on private vision. . . . Forms such as crosses, circles, pyramids, and mazes proliferate, emblematic of a more abstract spiritual search and evoking an ecumenical amalgam of Christian, Tantric, Native American, and Gnostic traditions."[14] In Mexico Conner met Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary, a pioneer in experiments with the use of LSD and other psychedelic drugs. Together they hunted for psilocybin mushrooms. Curator and critic Michael Duncan notes that the assemblages made in Mexico, while reflecting a period of introspection, were "intensified by Conner's experiments with peyote and psychedelic mushrooms."[15] Jean Conner recalls experiences of a different sort; they would often visit churches: "After a long walk, it was wonderful to sit in the quiet of a church. There were many interesting reliquaries to see."[16]

Many of the assemblages Conner made in Mexico in 1961–63 could be likened to reliquaries, in fact, and a number of their titles take Christian references—ANNUNCIATION (pl. 58), DRAWING WITH THORNS (pl. 57), CROSS (pl. 59), GUADALUPE (pl. 60), GOD'S EYE MEXICO, RESURRECTION—or include overtly Christian imagery, such as SENORITA (pl. 61).[17] Conner made PARTITION (pl. 67), the largest, densest, and most complex work completed in Mexico, over a freestanding room-dividing screen. Taking the form of a traditional altarpiece, it is composed of three large, hinged, human-scale panels. The front and back of each panel are heavily worked, with multiple layers of collage and an extraordinary variety of materials. The central panel (both front and back) explicitly includes images of Christ: the top of the front features a collage of old engravings of Christ on the Cross and the

14 Boswell, "Bruce Conner: Theater of Light and Shadow," 42.

15 Michael Duncan, "Keeping Up with Conner," *Art in America* 88, no. 6 (June 2000): 104–11, 134.

16 Jean Conner, interviews by Conway, 13.

17 For a close iconographic and formal analysis of SENORITA, see Kevin Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 86–89.

arisen Christ with outstretched hands, but pale and only legible with a close examination. On the back the Christ images are larger, more pronounced and prominent—the top image shows Christ gesturing to his followers after his release from the tomb while at the bottom a bold, colored image of Christ of the Sacred Heart is revealed through a large opening in the assemblage.[18] The right panel both front and back evokes a seductive and shimmering, but highly abstract, figure of a female with bejeweled emphasis on her sex. The left panel appears more cosmological in its treatment and range of materials. During this fertile time, Conner also produced numerous drawings, many of which he titled with biblical references—such as CROSS (pl. 76), GOLGOTHA (pl. 37), and BURNING BUSH (pl. 78)—though they often incorporated multiple spiritual references. In CROSS, for example, art historian Kevin Hatch notes that both "the Catholic crucifix and the God's eye of the Huichol of northwestern Mexico lurk behind the central form."[19]

In the spring of 1963, at the invitation of Leary, the Conners moved to the commune that he and fellow psychologist Richard Alpert had formed in Newton, Massachusetts. Here Conner made the first, most complex, and largest of his mandala drawings, 23 KENWOOD AVENUE (1963, pl. 100), named for the address of the commune.[20] After the uprootedness of his time in Mexico, and the sense of being unanchored in the Boston area, the mandala drawing may have been a way for Conner to regain balance and concentration. He later described the mandala as a subject "related to centering yourself or focusing your attention, your consciousness."[21] It was a subject that became central to his work for several years. While living in Boston, Conner became friends with Paula Kirkeby, who would later represent him in her gallery in Palo Alto, California. At the heart of their connection was an interest in spirituality.

Conner's reckoning with death, rebirth, spirituality, and religion took multiple forms during this period. Invited to make an application in 1963 for a Ford Foundation grant for filmmaking, Conner initially rejected the idea of applying. He said he felt he had to explain "my whole theory of art and life and what I intend to do in the future. How I'm to use whatever alms they will give me. I started drawing parallels of this kind of activity with religious rituals. Confessionals, ringing of bells, and doing penance in the street."[22] Eventually he relented. In the application, he wrote: "Religion is based on the faith of two or more people in the Revelation of one individual. The Faith creates an organization of common agreement. Science appears to be equally based on faith. I vote for personal revelation."[23]

After only three months in the commune, the Conners moved to Brookline, just outside Boston, and only a few blocks from the house where John F. Kennedy had been born. Conner became obsessed with Kennedy and his assassination in November 1963: "I was totally

18 Catholic devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is based on Christ's love and compassion for humanity.

19 Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner*, 220.

20 For an extended discussion of the background, composition, and significance of this drawing, see Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner*, 224–26.

21 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Paul Cummings, Apr. 16, 1973, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

22 Ibid.

23 Ford Foundation grant application, 1963, Bruce Conner Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereafter cited as BCP).

immersed and involved in the symbolism and media exploitation of his death and personality."[24] The following spring, on May 29, the day of Kennedy's birth, Conner made a pilgrimage to his house. While throngs of people had gathered at his grave in Arlington, Virginia, as well as in front of the book depository building in Dallas from which Kennedy had been shot, Conner found himself completely alone. He concluded that no one was interested in Kennedy's birth but only his death. Very shortly after this experience, Conner passed by a nearby hobby shop and bought a paint-by-numbers set of Leonardo da Vinci's iconic fresco *The Last Supper* (1495–98). Using only the given materials and meticulously following the set's instructions—or meticulously to a point, as the prominent drips attest—he completed the painting and titled it BLUE PLATE/SPECIAL (1964, pl. 82). The work is a sort of memoriam for Kennedy, while perhaps also a brooding contemplation of his own potential artistic death. By working with a given image and materials, Conner said, "I was going through a process of testing and acting as if I did not exist as an ego. And how does this compare with dying and with being born with other events that were taking place simultaneously. Of course, it is impossible to get rid of your ego. This action represented an awareness of what an egoless concept might be."[25]

The next year, Conner was invited to present a lecture and film screening at the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts. Instead of going himself, he sent a surrogate, a young student named Henry Moss whom he had befriended, to secretly stand in for him.[26] As curator Joan Rothfuss describes it, "Moss was instructed to begin by running the films, then read a 'speech' (its text consisted of New Testament verses on light; Moss read them from a Bible that Conner had marked with a highlighting pen), and to end the evening by repeating the film program, this time backwards."[27] The text almost assuredly was one that he used in his 1967 bid for San Francisco supervisor:

> The light of the body is the eye; therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light; but when thine eye is evil, thy body also is full of darkness. Take heed therefore that the light which is in there be not darkness. If thy whole body be full of light, having no dark part, the whole shall be full of light, as when the bright shining of a candle doth give thee light. . . . For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known.[28]

In a subsequent interview Conner asked: "Haven't you turned into pure light at some time or another? Some people do that when they take mushrooms. Or through mystical meditation. Sometimes it happens spontaneously as it happened to me when I was eleven years old."[29]

That summer, as part of an exhibition at Batman Gallery in San Francisco, Conner presented a series of thirteen canvases—twelve made by artist and fellow Wichitan John Pearson that

24 Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Peter Boswell, Sept. 1, 1985, part 2, Walker Art Center Archives, Minneapolis, 11.

25 For a rich and thorough account of the background for this work, see Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Robert Shimshak, June 15, 1991, edited by Conner, BCP.

26 Rothfuss, "Escape Artist," 170. Rothfuss also notes that Andy Warhol took up this same practice three years later, sending a stand-in for several public appearances.

27 Ibid.

28 Luke 11:34–36 and 12:2. Conner used this text in a Declarations of Candidacy pamphlet; see Boswell, "Bruce Conner: Theater of Light and Shadow," 74, and Rothfuss, "Escape Artist," 168. At the time Conner was running for supervisor, he kept in his desk "his own typewritten concordat to the New Testament, filled mostly with passages like 'the lilies of the field, how they grow.'" See Thomas Albright, "Meet Bruce Conner, Film-Maker," *Rolling Stone*, Mar. 9, 1968, 19.

29 Conner, interview by Boswell, Sept. 1, 1985, part 2, 13.

read “DO NOT TOUCH,” and one with lettering applied by Conner himself that read “TOUCH” (pl. 83).[30] Only the latter was glazed, defiantly making it impossible in fact to touch the work itself. Two sets of six panels were arrayed across from each other, with the TOUCH panel at the end between them, similar to an array of Stations of the Cross. This work clearly references *Noli me tangere,* the Latin version of Christ’s utterance “touch me not,” spoken to Mary Magdalene when she recognized him after his resurrection. The single panel made by Conner may be interpreted as his presence, a surrogate for Christ surrounded by his twelve apostles at the Last Supper. Conner lived in the gallery for three days, the full duration of the exhibition and the same period as Christ’s entombment before his resurrection. He said: “I slept in the back room. After three days the stone was rolled away and I walked out.”[31]

Conner made TOUCH/DO NOT TOUCH as a response to his discovery that year of a label next to his painting DARK BROWN (1959, pl. 43), in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Art (now San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), which warned viewers “Do not touch.” Surveying other works on view in the museum, he found that his painting was the only one with this admonition next to it. Conner had made the painting for McClure and purposely had framed it in brown faux fur because he knew his friend liked to touch works of art, and he expected that the paint surface would be touched: “There were areas of it that would be exposed sooner or later by people picking stuff off or touching it and wearing it out. There were other colors underneath those dark brown colors that would reveal themselves.”[32] He believed that taking away the participatory aspect of the work distorted it, but when he asked museum staff to remove the sign, they refused.[33] The episode struck at the heart of his complex and ambivalent relationship to both art objects and the institutional structures around them. “The artwork[s] which the establishment determines as being most successful are the ones that people are forbidden to come near. Like the Church destroying mystics who profess their individual illumination. They set up a business of priests who are the only ones who can run the business of revelation and sell you dispensations.”[34] He continued:

> In a way one of the themes that I’m talking about is the whole relationship of the spirit of the person (the artist) to the object itself. It became the form of the objects that I was making. Playing out those levels of social relationship of the art history of museums, of myself being alienated from the object itself, the object turning into things that I have no control over. But the object gets my name on them. And it gets to the point where it exists as a personality. If it becomes historical it exists as a weapon to me as a person, as an artist . . . I mean it can be used to destroy me as an artist, a living artist.[35]

30 For the genesis of this work, see Rachel Federman, “Bruce Conner: Fifty Years in Show Business—A Narrative Chronology,” in this volume; as well as Bruce Conner, interview conducted by Paul Karlstrom, Aug. 12, 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; and Rothfuss, “Escape Artist,” 180, which also includes a perceptive appraisal of the entire exhibition.

31 Conner, interview by Boswell, Sept. 1, 1985, part 2, 16.

32 Conner, interview by Boswell, July 20, 1983, 13.

33 See Rothfuss, “Escape Artist,” 180.

34 Conner, interview by Boswell, Sept. 1, 1985, part 2, 15.

35 Conner, interview by Karlstrom, Aug. 12, 1974.

In the early 1970s Conner turned to photography for the first time, and from 1973 to 1975 produced a series of photograms titled ANGELS (pls. 126–33 and 255), made in collaboration with the photographer Edmund Shea. Conner would place his body "between a large sheet of photosensitive paper and a light source," as curator Peter Boswell described:

> The area in which Conner's body blocked the light from reaching the paper is seen as white, while areas where the light struck the paper without interruption come out as black. . . . He appears as a radiant evanescence—spirit rather than flesh—hence the title of the series. But the figures' associations are not just angelic; they are also distinctly Christlike. . . . We have seen that Conner has used the image of Christ numerous times throughout his career. Early on, the emphasis tended to be on His martyrdom. . . . Here, however, we are dealing more with the resurrected Christ, the Christ of the spirit.[36]

Conner himself offered further complication to the reading of these works, saying, "Everything has a dialogue unless it is a pure revelation, one to one. Angels do not have defects. They don't have personalities or a variety of emotional contexts. People are imperfect and present an interior image and an exterior one. It is sometimes called duplicity."[37]

At the same time he was making the ANGELS, Conner initiated an extended series of drawings, some of which he referred to as STAR drawings (see pl. 122). In them Conner filled the entire sheet with overall fields of black ink, fastidiously leaving hundreds if not thousands of minute openings to the white paper ground. In his consideration of these drawings Boswell notes that "in many cultures stars are thought to be gods or the spirits of lost ancestors," while Hatch has observed that many of Conner's drawings, including the "starry night sky" and most obviously the mandala drawings, "open onto a plane of spiritual mystery."[38]

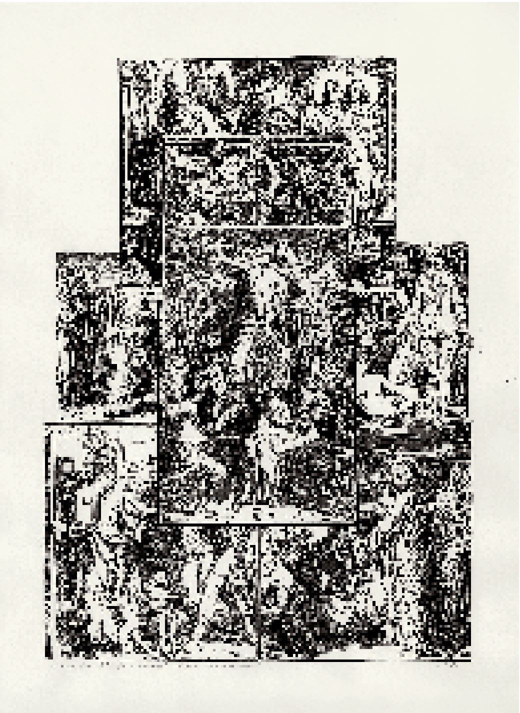
Conner would take up images of Christ and angels again the following decade. Between 1987 and 1991 he made a series of eight engraving collages (see pls. 226 and 228) that depict scenes from the life of Christ but with radical alterations from the straightforward biblical narrative. References to Greek and Roman classical motifs, Renaissance and later European art, nineteenth-century illustrations, occult symbols, and scientific renderings abound in enigmatic scenarios.[39] A few years later he made a digital collage of all eight images, an elaborate composition that he referred to as an altarpiece (fig. 4). Conner never developed this idea further; it exists only as a paper printout. He again revisited these collages in a series of tapestries, among the very last works he completed before his death in 2008. After scanning images of the collages into a computer, he carefully reworked them over a long period of time to give them a sharper visual presence as tapestries.

36 Boswell, "Bruce Conner: Theater of Light and Shadow," 72, 74.

37 Conner in Kohn, "An Interview with Bruce Conner," n.p.

38 Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner*, 244.

39 Conner had a narrative for each of these scenarios, according to Jean Conner. For a close reading of one of these collages, MARY ANOINTING JESUS WITH THE PRECIOUS OIL OF SPIKENARD (September 5, 1987, pl. 226), see Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner*, 273–75.



4

4 Collage of photocopies of eight collages to form an altarpiece, created for the announcement of an exhibition of Conner's photocopies at Café ?, San Francisco, 1994. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

Conner would make drawings through the end of his career. A primary focus was an extended group made with inkblots, which he had first begun to explore in 1975 (pls. 134–38). Working on one form at a time, Conner would fill a sheet with dozens, even hundreds, of very small, symmetrical ink drawings, formed by folding the paper on each drawing (see, for example, pls. 182–84). Describing this process, Conner said: "Sometimes it starts as preplanned, but then it may be altered very soon after the process starts. A fine point crow-quill pen is used to do the drawing. The paper is folded and a miracle occurs."[40] The variety of these drawings is astonishing. Conner noted that some may "have to do with nature, plants, flowers, and flower petals."[41] Others "may imply the character of Chinese or Japanese writing, letters, symbols, diagrams, Cuneiform designs, and Egyptian images."[42] Some appear as strange creatures or insects. As with the mandala drawings, issues of symmetry and order versus chance are paramount. Conner spoke clearly and eloquently about the significance of symmetry: "Symmetrical images are in nature: reflections of water surfaces, symmetry of patterns, symmetry of natural objects, crystals, snowflakes—the symmetry of animal and human. You can assume there was a commonality of experience when you see symmetrical forms from the past and other cultures. Sometimes symmetry becomes a form of mystical importance in religions or a sign of power in society. This mystery of symmetry appears to be a universal one. Perhaps this is a characteristic of our consciousness, looking at ourselves."[43]

While the majority of the inkblot drawings were executed as many individual images with strong linear composition, in the most sumptuous and ethereal of them, some composed of strips of paper collaged together, the inkblot takes on an overall pattern (pls. 194–96, 203–6, and 208).[44] These drawings echo the star fields, in which the contrast and tension between light and dark is the primary compositional element and a vision of mystical emanation is achieved.

40 Conner in Rasmussen, "Interview: Bruce Conner, Jack Rasmussen," 7.

41 Ibid., 6.

42 Ibid.

43 Conner in Kohn, "An Interview with Bruce Conner," n.p.

44 Conner made most of his inkblots in his house with typical precision and care, without a misplaced stroke or drop. The dark images were more messy and spontaneous, made in his garage by spattering ink.

Critics have noted their resemblance to the Shroud of Turin, believed by the devout to have wrapped the body of Christ after he was taken from the Cross and to bear the ghostly traces of his figure.[45]

Among the largest and most complex of the collage inkblots is BURNING BRIGHT (1996, pl. 204), which Hatch proposes "takes illumination as its central theme" and whose title comes from the William Blake poem "The Tyger" (from *Songs of Experience,* 1794).[46] Blake was an important early influence on Conner, and this particular poem, among his most famous, had been a frequent reference for the artist. The first stanza reads:

> Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
> In the forests of the night,
> What immortal hand or eye
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

As Hatch concludes, the "impression of light 'burning bright,' as if through the drawing's sheet, is paradoxically produced through an extraordinary manipulation of opaque blank ink."[47]

Also during this period, Conner struggled to make his most ambitious film, THE SOUL STIRRERS: BY AND BY, about the gospel group the Soul Stirrers. He never finished it.[48] According to McClure, Conner "had always been interested in black music . . . he introduced me to Lead Belly, which would have been my first introduction to true blues."[49] He first encountered the music of the Soul Stirrers while still in Kansas, where he had also attended gospel meetings.[50] When Conner moved to San Francisco, the area where he and Jean initially settled was close to the Western Addition, one of the most prominent black neighborhoods of the city, and his interest in gospel music was renewed; they began going to gospel meetings. Jean Conner recounts: "They welcomed us. We were strangers, for sure, and a little bit naive. Their minister was quite fiery. He spoke in tongues. There was lots of jumping up and down, shouting, clapping—very lively!"[51] Perhaps these meetings rekindled memories of the revival tent services in Kansas, and in talking about his interest in gospel, Conner recalled his childhood experience of disembodiment and transformation. "It seems to me that within religious contexts there are certain ways of talking about experience that don't exist otherwise." He elaborated, "What interested me was . . . some of the things that happen in these gospel songs—traditional phrases like, 'One day I changed. It was on a Wednesday, it was on a Tuesday, or it was on a Thursday.' People get up and wave their hands. That is when the Holy Ghost visited them. 'I looked at my hands, and my hands were new. I looked at my feet, my feet were, too.'"[52]

45 See Boswell, "Bruce Conner: Theater of Light and Shadow," 74; and Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner*, 280.

46 Hatch, *Looking for Bruce Conner*, 283.

47 Ibid.

48 See Henry S. Rosenthal, "Notes on THE SOUL STIRRERS: BY AND BY," in this volume.

49 McClure, interview by Karlstrom, Apr. 14, 2012, 10.

50 Boswell, "Bruce Conner: Theater of Light and Shadow," 82; Jean Conner, interviews by Conway, 14.

51 Jean Conner, interviews by Conway, 14.

52 Conner, interview by Boswell, July 20, 1983, 30.

For Conner art was a spiritual quest. It provided a means to approach realities beyond normal apprehension, to find release from the confinements of society, to attain redemption from the inhumanities that plague human existence. He had little interest in art as an instrument of commerce, as a way to achieve fame, as a means to be memorialized. He was wary of the market and distrusted institutions that removed art from life as it is lived. He believed art was a means to awaken the senses and deeply probe the potential of human existence. As the conclusion of an interview late in his life, Conner stated:

> I am interested in the moment of wonder, of not comprehending all of my experience in an adult context. We are born with millions of brain cells, more than we will have for the rest of our lives, and sensory awareness. We confront this total unknown entity in the world. The world starts to be fabricated into categories and the sense of wonder soon starts to disappear. I like to re-create that moment, the moment when you are confronted with something that is a surprise. It is a delight, a mystery, maybe an unsolvable mystery. Unsolvable mysteries are much more attractive to me.[53]

53 Conner in Kohn, "An Interview with Bruce Conner," n.p.

One of the very last works that Conner completed before his death was a film he titled EASTER MORNING (2008, pl. 256); a composition by Terry Riley accompanies it, a gently palpitating score for ancient Chinese musical instruments. The film opens with a throbbing collage of fragmented details of flowers and plants, palm fronds, grasses, and ferns. A candle flame rises up. A journey is initiated through intense fields of light and color, falling away into darkness, with constant punctuations of orbs of light and color and more images of leaves and flowers. Lush close-ups of brilliantly colored orchids appear, reverberating with female sexuality. Near the end a pulsing mandala pattern hovers, giving way to a light-filled window, an eye, a naked woman, and a cross seen above a rooftop. Finally, the young, beautiful nude woman, who appears quiescent, self-contained, and innocent, takes her place on a chair in golden light spilling in from windows, but then she stands and disappears. The film closes, a stunning distillation—if not final summary—of Conner's art, spirit, and life.





Diedrich Diederichsen

PSYCHEDELIC/REALIST: BRUCE CONNER AND MUSIC

Eating certain mushrooms induces a kind of intense but illegitimate knowledge, one that strikes like lightning and operates beyond everyday consciousness and academic rationality to rapidly illuminate something that would otherwise take years of reflection or meditation to acquire: the knowledge attributed to countercultures. In 2008, when the Museum Ludwig in Cologne mounted an exhibition on art and counterculture in San Francisco from 1955 to 1968, it was titled after a film by Bruce Conner: LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS.[1] Not only because of this film, but in light of his entire body of work, Conner personified the blend of bohemian culture, new forms of artistic production, an extreme degree of social and cultural mobility, and highly individual artistic expression widely associated with San Francisco. He exemplified many aspects of the scene: poetic, political, highly individual, and critical responses; found-footage film; strange documentations; music of the most disparate kinds; enigmatic surrealist drawings; concentrated meditation practices; and frivolous provocations.

Yet the film LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959–67/1996, pl. 62) is in many respects an exception in Conner's work. It is in color, it openly refers to drugs, and it features a Beatles song ("Tomorrow Never Knows") that enunciates something like a program for what one might call the "mystical realization" for which San Francisco stood in those years and that also plays a central role in Conner's work: "Turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream!" Conner was rarely this unambiguous—not because he was trying to hide but because "mystical realization" for him was always connected with a dialectical optical or figure-ground illusion in which, in the detachment from the world of the switched-off reasoning mind, a particularly clear realization exists that is also politically rational.

Conner always sought to defend his work against reduction to the purely local. His subjects, slogans, and main pictorial elements—from the mushroom cloud to Marilyn Monroe, from found advertisements and elements of everyday culture to pointed references to dance,

1 See Barbara Engelbach, Friderike Wappler, and Hans Winkler, *Looking for Mushrooms: Beat Poets, Hippies, Funk, Minimal Art, San Francisco 1955–1968*, exh. cat. (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008).

CROSSROADS, 1976 (pl. 125, stills)



1

1 CROSSROADS, 1976 (pl. 125, still)

movement, and pop music—are more universal components of a Western culture in transition to globalization than attempts to play on the stereotype of a liberated San Francisco in its golden age. Conner also rejected the notion that he was a pioneer of the music video or even invented the genre, as some of his contemporaries have maintained.[2]

Conner was a psychedelic and a realist in equal measure. As the technological arts of the twentieth century began to usher in a new era of sound and image, he began to perforate the sphere of art with little pinpricks of the real. And yet for Conner, this reality that seizes and assaults us like children who do not yet think in interpretive schemas was always also a form of mystical transgression, situated somewhere between the epiphanies of aesthetic experience (which remain in the realm of reflection) and the emphatic interruptions of everyday consciousness afforded by psychedelic drugs and ritual-religious disciplines such as the mushrooms of his title. Although mystical experiences can often be described as a feeling of being overwhelmed by the reality of the real, realistic and mystical conceptions of art are antagonists because of the social and antisocial aims with which they are associated. This is different for Conner in a particular way (although he never held the concept of reality in especially high regard) but in a more general sense it is also different for historical practices between poetry and jazz that are fittingly associated with San Francisco, as well as for the concepts and traditions of a politics of music developed in certain jazz, rock, and minimal music milieus in the first three decades after World War II: the drones and phase-shifted pieces of La Monte Young and Terry Riley, spiritualist free jazz, and the new rock music of the East and West Coasts, which had a great deal in common despite the cultural opposition between the sunglass-wearers from New York (the Velvet Underground) and the friendly hippie improvisers from San Francisco (the Grateful Dead).[3]

One of the bases of psychedelic aesthetics is the fundamental decontextualizing of perceptual objects under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs or similar states engendered by other means. The strengthening of the senses eclipses the everyday meaning and knowledge of, for

2 In an interview for a video on the making of the music video for Devo's "Mongoloid," Toni Basil relates that Conner would get "cranky" whenever he was credited with having invented the music video. See *Bruce Conner: MONGOLOID*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzqL4G6oA58.

3 For example, both bands—the Grateful Dead and the Velvet Underground—were previously called the Warlocks, before they came up with the names under which they became famous.

example, a coffee cup or a shoe to such an extent that its pure form pushes to the fore almost completely unhindered. That pure form then seems either ridiculous and funny or sublime; often, the impression alternates between the two extremes. In psychedelic poster art or in Art Nouveau–influenced album-cover graphics connected with psychedelics, these extremes are mediated by the use of rich ornamentation: ornaments are the classic connecting link between the meaningful form of a useful object and its abstract or pure form. But they are not charged or funny or full of tension; they pacify the contrast.

Another technique—the use of strobe lights or their effects—attacks the continuity of perception itself, as paradigmatically demonstrated by Conner's contemporary Tony Conrad in his film *The Flicker* (1965). In many of his films, Conner also worked with flickering light effects that juxtapose extreme degrees of brightness in fractions of a second, so that the continuity of the visual context is lost. These are also moments in which there is nothing to be seen: the screen no longer appears as a space of animated illusion but as a determining source for interpreting the real world of the auditorium. The strobe effect also relates to the primal scene of understanding symbols, Sigmund Freud's *fort-da* game, which was theoretically foundational for Jacques Lacan; it is used to teach very young children not just that there is a difference between presence and absence but also that what is absent can be made present by a specific representative, a symbol. The degree of presence of what is shown (and signified) by film and the illumination and stimulation of the viewer is the shared preoccupation of mystics and realists, as well as of those who combine the two, like Conner.

One particular dialectical image—that of the atomic blast—combines overly bright illumination with the reality of the illuminated public and removes light from its abstract role as a film-making tool, linking it directly to one of the central aspects of the human condition in the postwar period. The image (or more accurately, images) of the atomic blast is a leitmotif in Conner's cinematic output (fig. 1), referring allegorically to a particular type of truth and insight that was important not just for him but for an entire generation of mostly American artists: the realization that, in contrast to the European tradition and the debate between *poésie pure* and *poésie engagée,* which took place in France at roughly the same time as the Beat movement, the sudden, mystical light of a realization and the latter's political character are not opposites.

Mystical insight does not shed light on political realities incidentally: by its very nature it is opposed to false representation of the world in mass culture and mass media, and by religious and cultural institutions. By dint of that opposition, it stands on the side of a higher political truth. This notion is prefigured by U.S. traditions of mystical anarchism. But in the 1950s, the

decade that shaped Conner poetically and artistically, it found a new expression in Beat culture's opposition to the anti-Communist America of the McCarthy and Eisenhower era. Conner's friend Allen Ginsberg is perhaps the most famous exponent; he explicitly championed the connection between a mystical-spiritualist and an anticapitalist, left-wing lifestyle and "knowledge style."

In Conner's case, however, this is more complicated, since the practice he developed of working with found material seems precisely to accept ideology's images, or at least to accord them relevance. What may be his best-known found-footage work, A MOVIE (1958, fig. 2 and pl. 9), produced at the beginning of his career, surveys the entire repertoire of cinema's first half-century: acrobatics and other sensations; war; chase scenes and other depictions of movement and speed; and sex. The use of narrative structures to organize these moving images is presented as an undertaking both superficial and irrelevant. The film begins with the "End of Part Four" and includes other jokes involving ordinal numbers. Conner's classic has been repeatedly compared to other experimental films and found-footage works. From today's perspective, however, it is much more plausible to regard A MOVIE as an early version of Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–98), particularly in the context of the summary of that film's eight episodes in the first twenty minutes of Godard's *Notre musique* (Our Music, 2004): a headlong journey through typologies of visual attraction in which the seemingly dynamic and libidinous structure of the desire connected with the moving image appears as directly linked to concrete content. The way cowboys and Indians on horseback, as empty forms removed from their narrative context, generate a highly specific form of moving battle and also have a meaning is a phenomenon that can also be seen in Conner; indeed, the association of the flash of light with the nuclear explosion is even more fundamental and more powerful.

If such a simultaneous insight into reality links to political discovery in a deeply anti-ideological sense, then how is this aided by the images (and sounds) of the very same mass culture that—to remain within Buddhist and mystical metaphors of cognition—is constantly weaving the veil of Maya and hence working to prevent realization and spread ideology? The commonality between mystical realization and enlightening political insight into manipulative images and narration relies on an idea of false consciousness that involves two misconceptions: one of the political situation, the other regarding one's own (finite) existence. Consumerism, in this model of false consciousness, prevents not only the perception of capitalism—which produces it and slides it in front of its own contradictions—but also the perception of one's own personal physical and psychological existence, which is sedated by superficial gratifications.



2

2 A MOVIE, 1958 (pl. 9, still)

And yet these very same movie and newsreel images that propagate the normality of Fordist consumer culture and that Conner uses in his found-footage films offer the only possibility for referring in film—ex negativo—to a realm behind it, to something these images conceal. It would be a mistake to seek to show the real itself. Instead, the fracture within the ideological text must develop an epiphanic impact. This idea of cinematic montage differs from those expressed in dadaist collages or Soviet ideas of filmic montage as an instrument of enlightenment, in that there is no switching from one context to another (for example, the profane realm of advertising and the lofty sphere of high art). In the Dada era, the individual contexts and image types were still more easily identifiable. In Conner's work, by contrast, the entire procedure is directed against a false whole that appears to Beat thinking, as well as to the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School of the time, as a totality.[4] Hence it must be contested at the level of any and all continuities.

4 Theodor W. Adorno, "The Whole Is the False," in *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 50.

A major problem of such struggles—and again, this was better understood in the United States on the eve of the emergence of Pop art than it was in Frankfurt—is the advance decision they involve. Can we know—and should we know—that movie and television images represent something false? Is this even an accurate description? A parade of film and TV clips that recognizably seek to document a truth value as something else or in reference to something else would be dull. The effort to denounce what is always already false about ideological images spells the demise of critical art, and as counterpropaganda it is governed by the same logic as the cultural-industrial production of ideology itself. Instead, the goal—and here the Buddhist metaphor is helpful—is to show the veil *as* veil; and this of course means first in its bizarre beauty and second in its lack of connection to reality.

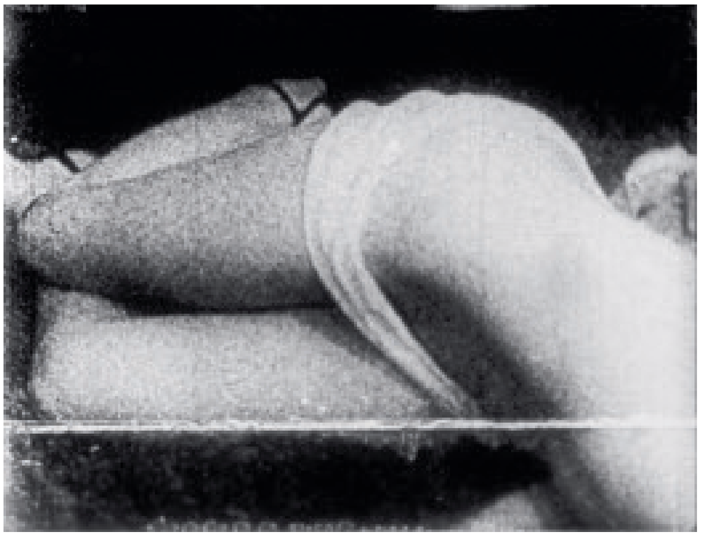
At the same time, however—Conner was particularly clear-sighted about this—the process of sticking images together always results in a continuity of some kind. We are accustomed to experiencing any series of images as meaningful and given; at the very least, we assume that there is an intact subjectivity and intentionality responsible for their sequence. Hence there

can be no absolute avoidance of continuity; but perhaps there can be an active, purposeful design. For the gulf between the television images becomes all the larger—the gap that perhaps lets a hint of reality through yawns all the wider—the more that continuity is not just the result of the sequence of the images and the black and ultrabright inserts, the more *another* continuity is created: that of music.

In COSMIC RAY (1961, p. 51), the first of his films in which music operates in a pivotal way, Conner used what is probably Ray Charles's most famous hit, "What'd I Say," a staple of classic soul and R&B. The song is a product of the culture industry as well as the absolute opposite, the product of a social community in the grip of historical experiences: the African American community on the eve of the civil rights era. In all its power and charm, however, it stands for more than the alternation between appearance and reality. The thing that becomes true and available to experience in this music is also what Conner sought to accomplish for the flow of found images: in their new combination, the corrupted mass media images also recover their nature as photographic images. They once again become photographed, filmed images that can shed their customary function. Thus, the terrible beauty of atomic blasts changes from the terrible fact that their beauty is used for trivializing and ideological propaganda to the actual but mysterious beauty of an event that puts the existence of human beings on the planet in question. Similarly, in MARILYN TIMES FIVE (1968–73, fig. 3), the fake Marilyn from a cheap 1940s stag movie becomes the true Marilyn, on one hand because she is musicalized by repetition against the conventional narration, and on the other because the excerpt's repetition enables the cheaper production values of the film from which the found material is taken to fortify the element of photographic materiality against the cultural-industrial myth. The material from the Kennedy assassination in REPORT (1963–67, pl. 84) functions in a similar way.

To return to our opening question: How could Conner's practice make use of such disparate musical worlds? The preliminary answer is that this practice took a wide variety of forms. For example, Conner, whose mandala drawings and other works were used by Terry Riley as album covers for his releases on the Cortical Foundation's "Organ of Corti" series,[5] worked with the famous minimal music pioneer at a time when the status of the images had already gained a certain clarity and no longer represented assemblages of seemingly heterogeneous material. In CROSSROADS (1976, fig. 1 and pl. 125), Conner's most famous work involving original images of U.S. nuclear tests, Riley's music is employed in classically dramatic fashion. Also participating is Patrick Gleeson, known for his electronic contributions to the electrified jazz-rock of the 1970s (by Herbie Hancock, Eddie Henderson, Lenny White, and others).

5 See Terry Riley, *Olson III* and *Poppy Nogood and the Phantom Band "All Night Flight"* (Cortical Foundation, 1999 and 1996, respectively).



3

3 MARILYN TIMES FIVE, 1968–73 (still). 16mm film, black and white, sound, 13:30 min. Courtesy Conner Family Trust

Here the music supports a gesture that already operates beyond the dialectical "tipping points" that are the life blood of A MOVIE. It may be that the images' credibility had effectively been restored by the cleansing preparatory work of the collage-like pieces.

By contrast, the tipping points and their dialectical dance in A MOVIE benefit from the composition *Pini di Roma* by Ottorino Respighi, which already sounded like typical movie music before Conner used it, having been employed with conviction in Disney films and with ambivalence by Kenneth Anger in *Fireworks* (1947). This music is superficially eventful and good at connecting things; yet it exposes its illusory character through its overly vital and effervescent opulence. Between the exuberance that helps to penetrate to the truthfulness of the images in A MOVIE; the power of Ray Charles in COSMIC RAY (and its reworking as an installation, THREE SCREEN RAY, 2006, pl. 252); and the rapt concentration of CROSSROADS or of EASTER MORNING RAGA (1966), which is devoted to Indian music and was also reworked as EASTER MORNING (2008, pl. 256), in which raga is replaced by Riley's minimal classic *In C,* lie Conner's works with dancer and singer Toni Basil. With BREAKAWAY (1966, pl. 20), Conner for the first time inverted the principle of borrowing from music an alternate vehicle for stabilizing or strengthening sequences of images; here the aim is to align the music (Basil's hit song of the same name) with images of his own that go together with the dance and performance of the protagonist.[6]

6 Conner started work on BREAKAWAY in October 1964; Basil recorded the song "Breakaway" in 1966.

This development also paralleled changes in the counterculture between the early and late 1960s: from the abstract experiments with expanded media at the San Francisco Tape Music Center, to Conner's involvement in psychedelic light shows at the Avalon Ballroom, which were still primarily abstract but were built around rock improvisation more than electronic experimentation, and finally to the gradual shift of attention to the musicians themselves as people and their performance. In its effect on Conner's cinematic notions of rhythm, the innovative blending of classical modernist elements with rock and hippie movements in

Tony Basil's choreography is not unlike the impression made on him earlier by Ray Charles and R&B. Also, it was ultimately Basil who introduced Conner to artists from the new scene at the end of the following decade, especially Devo, for whom he composed a film like a music video for the song "Mongoloid."

In the late 1970s, Conner, who was so closely linked to the development of the San Francisco counterculture from the Beat days onward, who was close friends with leading figures like Allen Ginsberg and even closer friends with Michael McClure through the expanded arts phenomenon of the early 1960s and the hippie culture of later in the decade, took a series of photographs at San Francisco's punk club Mabuhay Gardens that first appeared in the famous punk fanzine *Search and Destroy*.[7] In these photographs, he was not in search of the typical protagonists of a new San Francisco subculture, and he was clearly not a participant, as he had been in the earlier movement. Some of the groups he photographed were L.A. bands like Negative Trend or U.X.A., while others were local celebrities like the Mutants, who were unknown outside San Francisco. The best known of the local bands—from the Dead Kennedys to Tuxedomoon—do not appear in these photographs, but the great New York band Suicide does (it was artistically related in spirit). Conner was not interested in producing a survey, but rather—as in his work with Basil—an astonished focus on human possibilities emerging unexpectedly, in this case from an aggressive negation of the entire countercultural prehistory for which San Francisco was famous and with which Conner himself was so intimately linked. They are all live photographs without any special choreography, by-products of performative abandon, not high points but found objects apparently discovered by a gaze that thought it had found something like a new species in a setting where one could no longer count on making such discoveries in the late 1970s: the stages of rock clubs.

Devo was an art-punk band, and they knew what they had in Conner. They were familiar with his work. But through them, he too gained entry to the emerging world of punk and post-punk culture, ultimately producing two films for a project that did musically almost exactly what he himself had done in many of his films: use found material to produce a commentary on that material. In this project, however—*My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* by David Byrne and Brian Eno—the focus is not just on the found object as a secondary artifact that is interesting because it has already made a detour through the sphere of circulation. It is also on what a recording picks up before any interpretation, ideology, or mass-cultural exploitation. Byrne, the leader of the Talking Heads, and the band's producer, Brian Eno, had retreated to make an album with a number of other musicians and rearranged musical found objects that were primarily recorded from global radio. Their aim was to study a particular ideology, the various forms of organized rituals in and around music that the two musicians encountered.

7 See *Bruce Conner: Mabuhay Gardens*, exh. cat. (Düsseldorf: NRW-Forum Kultur und Wirtschaft, 2006).

Here Conner returned with special virtuosity to elements familiar from his early works: the flickering of light and dark, strong white light, suns, abstract elements from didactic films completely devoid of context, industrial and other physical marks on film. In short, he activated the musical elements of his rhythmic found-footage strategy, but not his earlier play with meaning, truth, and ideology. That play could be safely left to the musical project, which, as Byrne and Eno themselves have explained, had learned from Conner what it means to work with found material; or as they say in the liner notes for the 2006 reissue: "His work was sampling before that word existed, as was this record."[8] It is telling nonetheless that the musical project also takes up the central question Conner consistently asked: What is the connection between interruption, abruptness, the loss or switching of contexts, and religious or mystical forms of insight? And how can these moments of fortunate interruption or loss of context be preserved within a different continuity?

8 David Byrne and Brian Eno, "The Making of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*," liner notes in CD booklet (EMI Virgin, 2006).



Stuart Comer

SURFACE TENSION: BRUCE CONNER IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Bruce Conner was highly attuned to the variability of life and the materials that give it form. Strongly intrigued by entropy, he was committed to a belief that the implicit mortality of his objects and assemblages might offer the potential to transcend ossification by institutions and the imposition of official histories. Reordering the detritus of postwar life as readily as he rearranged his own identity through a series of pseudonyms and role-play maneuvers, his work suggests subjectivities, spaces, and surfaces with a markedly protean, albeit frequently sinister, nature.

If his objects are recognizable by their accumulations of dark voids, distressed materials, and the imminent violence of the atomic age and its burgeoning consumerism, his films are similarly charged with an endless rehearsal of death and decay, but also, perhaps even more emphatically, with "real people dying real deaths," from the car crashes, sinking ships, and assassinations in A MOVIE (1958, pl. 9) to the billowing nuclear annihilation that unfolds horrifically in CROSSROADS (1976, pl. 125).[1]

Conner's fever dream of catastrophe seems inseparable from the cinematic apparatus that delivered his now iconic imagery into the world. His ability to desynchronize the time of material human experience from the time of its representation through editing, repetition, and manipulating duration has everything to do with the logic of the filmstrip and the analog time of the film projector.

For Conner celluloid functions as a kind of skin or membrane, not unlike the screens and shredded stockings in his assemblages. The light that passes through these scrolls of found and pirated imagery to animate his apocalyptic imaginary belongs to the same era as the searing illumination of X-rays and atomic energy. It seems a jarring irony that the physical apparatus of photochemical cinema is itself now nearly a casualty of technological progress.

CROSSROADS, 1976 (pl. 125), installation view at Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, 2014

1 Morgan Fisher, keynote lecture for the symposium "Anticipating the Past: Artists: Archive: Film," Tate Modern, London, 2006.

What becomes of the nuclear, corporeal, and often abject materiality of Conner's cinema in the digital age? What happens when the gaps between his images of death, the events they record, and we who watch them decades later are further complicated by the transmutation of these images into digital data? What forms or fragments of cinematic materiality can survive in Conner's work, particularly following the meticulous digital restoration and reconstruction of A MOVIE, BREAKAWAY (1966, pl. 20), REPORT (1963–67, pl. 84), LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959–67/1996, pl. 62), and CROSSROADS by Ross Lipman and Michelle Silva?[2]

Conner's work suggests that one cannot simply delineate a straightforward dichotomy between analog and digital. Just as he upended conventional narrative structure in films like A MOVIE, noted for its series of temporal reversals and repeats, so too his move toward reediting his works as multiple-screen installations and the subsequent digitization of his films propose a fluid state between mediatic forms, where the photochemical image infects its digital double, activating material and even immaterial relations between the two. In the shift of Conner's work in his final years to new digital formats and the realization of his desire for more immersive spaces of projection, can his work provide signposts for how we might navigate an age in which physical matter is ever more embedded within a matrix of ready-made, often commercial images?

In a recent assessment of film's survival in the digital age, artist Tacita Dean cites director Christopher Nolan's point that "there is something profound in knowing that the light that reflected off the desert sand and exposed the salt crystals in David Lean's negative of *Lawrence of Arabia* is, through a bond of chemistry and process, the very same light captured in the print you are watching. Uniquely indexical to film and its reproduction, it is a continuous connection to a particular moment of time and place that will only get broken . . . if the work is digitized."[3]

But for films like A MOVIE and CROSSROADS, Conner's act of appropriation and reediting ruptures the very notion of such indexical continuity. He used neither a camera nor a microphone to record these two landmark films but instead ushered in an era of pronounced remediation at the dawn of the televisual age. His constant breaking and fragmentation of "a continuous connection to a particular moment of time and place" is one of the primary engines of his films.

Conner's work arguably forestalls the increasingly unstable relationships between the physical and virtual surfaces of the world, anticipating the sensibility of younger, emerging

2 For more detail about this restoration project, see Ross Lipman, "Conservation at a Crossroads: Ross Lipman on the Restoration of a Film by Bruce Conner," *Artforum* 52, no. 2 (Oct. 2013): 272–79.

3 Tacita Dean, "The Last Picture Show," *Artforum* 54, no. 2 (Oct. 2015): 296.

practitioners like the British artist Ed Atkins, who observes, "In the absence of a body, a tangible medium or body, there is a different kind of materiality described . . . [a] lack of physical resolution, but rather a haunting of different physical situations. . . . HD—at whatever current height it's reached (4K, 48fps?)—seems testament to this compensatory movement of material truth away from the body of the medium . . . into the image."[4]

4 Ed Atkins in Giampaolo Bianconi, "Ed Atkins: Artist Profile," *Rhizome* (Jan. 12, 2013), http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/jan/21/artist-profil.

COSMIC RAY (1961, p. 51) is one of the first films in which Conner combined found footage and sequences that he shot himself. It is also one of the first films whose form he radically expanded, presenting it in 1965 as a three-screen projection at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, using 8mm Technicolor black-and-white cartridge units, and in 2006 transforming it into the three-channel video installation THREE SCREEN RAY (pl. 252). Created at the end of his life while invoking an earlier experiment, THREE SCREEN RAY highlights the extent to which Conner never ceased to interrogate the conventions and possibilities of cinema in all their mutability, and the intensity with which he had engaged both the space of the archive and that of lived, direct experience. Drawn together into this immersive space of crossover, where the arenas of cinema and the museum could meet at the junction of matter and light, this late work, in addition to his final film, the transcendent EASTER MORNING (2008, pl. 256), positions Conner's practice as a testing ground for a critical negotiation between life, history, and the image as the materiality of all three undergoes profound change.



Johanna Gosse

EASTER MORNING: BRUCE CONNER'S SECOND COMING

Bruce Conner completed his final film, EASTER MORNING (pl. 256), in the months before his death in July 2008. As the culmination of a half-century of his filmmaking, EASTER MORNING registers Conner's long-standing interest in film's capacity to represent, and, in a sense, to master, the unruly flow of visual and sensual experience. At the same time, it suggests a relentless pursuit—however provisional, flawed, and asymptotic—of transcendence from the specificities of time and place, the limitations of the flesh, and the vicissitudes of the everyday world. Moreover, as his last film, and one that was produced exclusively as a digital edition, EASTER MORNING also pushes us to reconsider Conner's work in the context of the early twenty-first century.

If Conner's trademark style of rapid-fire montage and audiovisual appropriation are recognized as key strategies within contemporary art practice, these superficial markers also appear to structure the broader digital ecology of everyday life.[1] Recycled sounds and images proliferate in mainstream media, serving as constant reminders that appropriation can be used just as readily for cultural affirmation and profit generation as for critique. Indeed, Conner's strategic use of appropriation anticipated the political and economic issues that have accompanied the shift to an information society, for instance, those associated with intellectual property, copyright, and creative commons. In this sense, his work functions as an *urtext* not only for music video, but for subgenres such as the remix, supercut, mash-up, and various practices of parodic or critical media intervention that flourish on user-generated video sharing platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo.

When Conner decided to finally venture into the digital realm, he did so with some apprehension and much guidance from Michelle Silva, his editor and primary collaborator on THREE SCREEN RAY (2006, pl. 252). For that work, Conner and Silva translated his trademark

1 Countless artists and filmmakers have drawn inspiration from Conner's pioneering use of found footage and pop music appropriation. See *Cut: Film as Found Object in Contemporary Video*, exh. cat., ed. Stefano Basilico, Lawrence Lessig, and Rob Yeo (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 2004).

256 EASTER MORNING 2008
8mm film transferred to video, color, with sound, 10 min.
Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of the Conner Family Trust

found-footage strategies to a digital platform by taking advantage of the vast corpus of searchable, web-based archives and the postproduction capacities of editing software. Yet, for EASTER MORNING, the move to digital was more a matter of convenience and control than of structural or formal necessity. Even so, Conner's motivation to complete this work in the last months of his life points to its significance as his final word on film, time, and mortality.

The footage seen in EASTER MORNING is derived from an unfinished 1966 film called EASTER MORNING RAGA, which Conner shot himself and edited entirely in camera, leading him to refer to it as his "perfect film."[2] The imagery in EASTER MORNING includes kaleidoscopic multiple exposures of plants, flowers, and nocturnal streetlights, intercut with shots of a nude, seated woman (Suzanne Mowat), as she poses next to a windowsill on a bright Sunday morning. These images are paired with close-ups of the graphic patterns on an Oriental rug and stark shots of a white stone crucifix perched against the blue San Francisco skyline. The imagery draws from a set of iconographic themes that recur throughout Conner's body of work, including the nude female body, Christianity, and memories from his Midwestern childhood. The latter is symbolized by the inclusion of an Oriental rug, which recalls Conner's narrative of his first out-of-body, mystical experience at age eleven—a critical scene in the artist's personal mythology.[3]

EASTER MORNING features a soundtrack by minimalist composer Terry Riley, *In C* (1964), a phase composition intended for varying orchestral ensembles. Conner selected the Shanghai Film Orchestra's interpretation of Riley's score, which is performed on antique Chinese instruments. The clanging, archaic tones produced by these instruments suggest a sense of historical and geographic distance and otherness, which, in turn, amplifies EASTER MORNING's atmosphere of enigma and mystery. Structured by Riley's phased repetition, the soundtrack reinforces the notion of physical transcendence suggested by the film's title, iconography, and staccato, slow-motion montage.

The title of EASTER MORNING refers to both the date and time of filming, and to the ritual sunrise service performed during the springtime celebration of Christ's resurrection. Conner's invocation of this Messianic event situates his film within the specific, calendrical time of an Easter Sunday, as well as the metaphysical, proleptic temporality of the future anterior, the foretold "what will have been" of death, redemption, and salvation. Yet, with the original title's inclusion of the term "raga," Conner coupled the eschatological temporality of Western Christendom with the more melodic, improvisatory, and less fixed temporality of the Hindu classical musical form, as if to propose a union of conflicting timescales, theologies, and histories. Thus, while EASTER MORNING draws from a common vocabulary of visual

2 For the final, 2008 version, Conner transferred the original 8mm Kodachrome to 16mm film, and then used an optical printer to step-print the footage, multiplying the frame rate 5:1 to stretch its duration fivefold. The result is similar to the slow-motion 1996 version of LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (pl. 62) that uses Terry Riley's "Poppy Nogood and the Phantom Band" (1968) as its soundtrack. After utilizing this analog, frame-by-frame printing technique, Conner then had EASTER MORNING transferred to digital video, which is how it is exclusively distributed today.

3 See Gary Garrels, "Soul Stirrer: Visions and Realities of Bruce Conner," in this volume.

motifs and themes familiar within Conner's work, it also embeds them within an expanded, nonlinear approach to cinematic time, a hallmark of his filmmaking since the 1960s. From the hyperactive, subliminal montage of COSMIC RAY (1961, p. 51); to the delirious, drug-infused rhythms of LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959–67/1996, pl. 62); the bodily dematerializations and reverse-loop form of BREAKAWAY (1966, pl. 20); the profane resurrections and staccato montage of REPORT (1963–67, pl. 84) and MARILYN TIMES FIVE (1968–73, p. 351); and the apocalyptic, glacial unfolding of CROSSROADS (1976, pl. 125), Conner used film to perform radical inquisitions on vision, time, and the body.

As a digital "re-vision" of an incomplete film from the 1960s, EASTER MORNING reflects a set of concerns and preoccupations that are consistent across Conner's five-decade filmmaking career. Yet, as his cinematic finale, it also marks the apotheosis of his aesthetic exploration of the "atomic sublime," the paradoxical experience of "terrible beauty" that characterizes his films since A MOVIE (1958, pl. 9).[4] This sublime union of opposing forces—Eros and Thanatos, awe and fear, desire and dread—is echoed in the notion of an Easter morning raga, the imaginary soundtrack to both an end time and an eternal becoming, which hovers between the analog past and the digital present, in anticipation of futures unknown.

4 The term "atomic sublime" provides the theoretical framework for my PhD dissertation, "Cinema at the Crossroads: Bruce Conner's Atomic Sublime, 1958–2008" (Bryn Mawr College, 2014).

EXHIBITION AND SCREENING HISTORY

Selected reviews and related articles follow exhibition and screening listings.

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Tribute to Bruce Conner, Pacific Film Archive, University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, Nov. 21.

1996 *Elite Novelties: Salon Art of the Nineties, Thirteen Engraving Collages by Bruce Conner,* Smith Andersen Gallery, Palo Alto, California, Feb. 8–Mar. 15.

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Bruce Conner: Wood Engraving Collages 1961 to 1996, Susan Inglett Gallery, New York, Apr. 7–May 20.

Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, June 7–July 8.

Bruce Conner: Early Assemblages and Recent Inkblot Drawings, Kohn Turner Gallery, Los Angeles, Sept. 16–Oct. 28. Brochure.

Dead Punks and Ashes, Curt Marcus Gallery, New York, Oct. 20–Nov. 24.

Twenty-Two Inkblot Drawings, 1991 to 1999, Kohn Turner Gallery, Los Angeles, Sept. 16–Oct. 28. Catalogue.

2001 *BRUCE CONNER and THE DENNIS HOPPER ONE MAN SHOW VOLUME III,* Susan Inglett Gallery, New York, Sept. 18–Oct. 27.

2002 *Other Artworks by Anonymous, ANON, Anon. and Anonymouse,* Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, Mar. 4–30.

Bruce Conner, Collages 1966–1996, Alan Koppel Gallery, Chicago, Apr. 26–June 14.

Bruce Conner: Intaglio Prints; Illustrations for "The Ballad of Lemon and Crow" by Glenn Todd, Arion Press Gallery, San Francisco, Aug. 1–31.

2002 B.C., Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, Sept. 7–30.

2003 *BRUCE CONNER and THE DENNIS HOPPER ONE MAN SHOW VOLUME II,* Susan Inglett Gallery, New York, Jan. 16–Mar. 1.

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Bruce Conner: Tapestries, Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, Mar. 27–Apr. 24.

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2005 *An Exhibition Full of Mysteries,* Smith Andersen Editions, Palo Alto, California, Oct. 7–Nov. 9.

Bruce Conner: Tapestries and Drawings, Paintings, Sculpture and Wood Engraving Collages, Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, Oct. 12–Nov. 19.

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After Bruce Conner: Anonymous, Anonymouse, and Emily Feather, Katzen Art Center Museum, American University, Washington, DC, Oct. 21–Dec. 17. Catalogue.

Gopnik, Blake. "After Bruce Conner: Anonymous, Anonymouse, and Emily Feather." *Washington Post,* Nov. 6, 2005.

Wielcy Amerykańscy Filmowcy Eksperymentalni: Bruce Conner i inni z Canyon Cinema [Great American Experimental Filmmakers: Bruce Conner and Others of Canyon Cinema], Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, May 11 and June 11.

Conner Obscura, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Dec. 8 and Dec. 10.

2006 *Cinema Invisible,* Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Feb. 23 and Mar. 2.

Miyake Fine Art, Tokyo, Mar. 18–Apr. 15.

Bruce Conner: Engraving Collages, 1961–1990, Karl Hutter Fine Art, Beverly Hills, California, Apr. 7–May 6.

Bruce Conner: Selections, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln, Nebraska, July 5–Sept. 26.

Bruce Conner: Mabuhay Gardens, NRW-Forum Kultur und Wirtschaft, Düsseldorf, Oct. 6–Nov. 22.

2007 *Bruce Conner: Assemblages, 1954–1963,* Susan Inglett Gallery, New York, Jan. 11–Feb. 10.

Turvey, Lisa. "Bruce Conner, Susan Inglett Gallery." *Artforum* 45, no. 8 (Apr. 2007): 277.

Bruce Conner and Company, Michael Kohn Gallery at Art Basel 38, June 13–17.

Bruce Conner: Works on Paper, 1961 to 2005, Susan Inglett Gallery, New York, Oct. 18–Nov. 17.

Bruce Conner: PUNKS (1978) and DEAD ASHES (1997) and EVE-RAY-FOREVER (2006), Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, Oct. 20–Nov. 24.

Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, Oct. 31–Nov. 24.

2008 *Bruce Conner: Mabuhay Gardens,* Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California, Berkeley, June 4–Aug. 3.

Applause, Miyake Fine Art, Tokyo, Sept. 6–Dec. 20.

Hommage à Bruce Conner, 37e Festival du Nouveau Cinéma, Montreal, Oct. 10.

Bruce Conner, The Last Magician of the 20th Century, Harvard Film Archive, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Oct. 18–19.

Austin Film Society Presents Avant Cinema 2.3: In Honor of Conner, Alamo Drafthouse, The Ritz, Austin, Nov. 5.

A Tribute to Bruce Conner, Cornell Cinema, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, Nov. 18.

2009 Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, Jan. 14, 21, and 28 and Feb. 4.

Delorme, Stéphane. "Honneurs à Conner." *Cahiers du cinéma,* no. 643 (Mar. 2009): 57.

New Jersey Film Festival Spring 2009: A Tribute to Bruce Conner, Rutgers Film Co-op/New Jersey Media Arts Center, New Brunswick, Feb. 26.

Bruce Conner's Explosive Cinema: A Tribute, Part 1, UCLA Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles, Feb. 28.

Foundas, Scott. "Master of the Mix: A Bruce Conner Assemblage." *L.A. Weekly,* Feb. 25, 2009.

Bruce Conner: Prints, Posters, Books, etc., 871 Fine Arts, San Francisco, Feb. 12–Apr. 28.

Bruce Conner's Explosive Cinema: A Tribute, Part 2, Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater, Los Angeles, Mar. 2.

San Francisco Cinematheque Presents Crossroads: The Films of Bruce Conner, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, Mar. 18–19.

Bruce Conner Retrospective, Ann Arbor Film Festival, Michigan, Mar. 28–29.

The Films of Bruce Conner, Gene Siskel Film Center, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Apr. 16–17.

Bruce Conner: A Tribute, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Apr. 26.

Northwest Film Center, Portland Documentary and eXperimental Film Festival and Cinema Project Present Bruce Conner: In Memoriam, Northwest Film Center, Portland, Oregon, May 5–6.

LUKE, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, July 1–Aug. 30.

Bruce Conner Discovered, Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, Sept. 8–Oct. 10.

Paskin, Murray. "Discovering Bruce Conner." *San Francisco Examiner,* Oct. 1, 2009.

Bruce Conner in the 1970s, Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, Nov. 7–Dec. 19.

Miles, Christopher. "'Bruce Conner in the 1970s' at Michael Kohn Gallery." *L.A. Weekly,* Nov. 18, 2009. • Pagel, David. "Surfaces that Run Deep." *Los Angeles Times,* Nov. 20, 2009.

Art Kabinett Bruce Conner, Michael Kohn Gallery, Art Basel Miami, Dec. 4–13.

2010 *Long Play: Bruce Conner and the Singles Collection,* San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Jan. 16–May 23.

The Late Bruce Conner, Susan Inglett Gallery, New York, Jan. 28–Mar. 13.

At 44 ½: Creative Time Presents Bruce Conner, Times Square, New York, Feb. 1–28.

INOVA/Kenilworth Institute, Peck School of the Arts, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Aug. 20–Sept. 26.

I Am Bruce Conner. I Am Not Bruce Conner, Ursula Blickle Foundation, Kraichtal, Germany, Sept. 12–Oct. 17. Catalogue.

Bruce Conner: The 70s, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Oct. 8, 2010–Jan. 30, 2011. Catalogue.

Ballhausen, Thomas. "Bruce Conner." *Eikon* 73 (2011): 74–75. • Höller, Christian. "Bruce Conner. Die 70er Jahre; Bruce Conner—Sämtliche Filme." *Springerin* 17, no. 1 (2011): 69–70. • Huber, Christoph. "Kosmische Kunst und rasender Film." *Observer* (Vienna), Oct. 14, 2010. • Irrgang, Christina. "Ausbrechen und Eintauchen: Experimentalfilme von Bruce Conner in der Ursula-Blickle-Stiftung." *Badische Neueste Nachrichten,* Oct. 5, 2010. • Kamalzadeh, Dominik. "Sterne und andere Stars: Maler, Zeichner, Filmemacher: Bruce Conner in der Kunsthalle Wien." *Observer* (Vienna), Oct. 16, 2010. • Nash, Aily. "Bruce Conner: The '70s." *Kaleidoscope,* Jan. 1, 2011.

Bruce Conner: An American Original, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Nov. 10–18.

Bruce Conner: The Art of Montage, Film Forum, New York, Nov. 10–23.

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Bruce Conner: Cinéma et vidéo—Séance, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, Nov. 24.

Bruce Conner for Supervisor, Specific Object, New York, Nov. 29–Dec. 17, 2010; Jan. 3–28, 2011.

2011 Kunsthalle Zürich at Museum Bärengasse, Zurich, Apr. 2–May 29. Catalogue.

von Burg, Dominique. "Bruce Conner." *Kunst Bulletin* 5 (May 2011): 82–83.

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Bruce Conner: The Art of Montage, International House, Philadelphia, Sept. 23–24.

Bruce Conner Film Marathon: The Art of Montage, Beursschouwburg, Brussels, Oct. 27.

EYE-RAY-FOREVER, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, Oct. 27, 2011–Dec. 9, 2012.

Smee, Sebastian. "Bruce Conner's Flickering Spirit of a Bold Precursor." *Boston Globe,* Nov. 8, 2011.

2012 *Bruce Conner—Mabuhay Gardens: Punk Photography and Collage,* Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, Feb. 29–Mar. 31.

Bruce Conner and the Primal Scene of Punk Rock, Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, Mar. 30–June 24.

Bruce Conner: The Art of Montage, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Apr. 26 and May 3.

Afterimage: The Prints of Bruce Conner, Senior & Shopmaker Gallery, New York, Sept. 20–Nov. 17. Catalogue.

Schultz, Charles. "Afterimage: The Prints of Bruce Conner." *Art in Print* 2, no. 4 (Nov./Dec. 2012): 44–45.

2013 Anthology Film Archives, New York, Feb. 2–3.

Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, May 7–June 21.

Morgan, Robert C. "Bruce Conner." *Brooklyn Rail,* June 3, 2013.

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2014 *Bruce Conner: Inkblot Drawings, 1992–2003,* Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, Feb. 12–Mar. 15.

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Searle, Adrian. "Adrian Searle's 10 Best Art Shows of 2015." *Guardian,* Dec. 15, 2015.

2016 *Bruce Conner: It's All True,* The Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 3–Oct. 2. Organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; traveling to San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Oct. 29, 2016–Jan. 22, 2017; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Feb. 21–May 22, 2017.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS AND SCREENINGS

1956 Alan Gallery, New York, May 22–June 16.

"About Art and Artists: Lesser-Known Figures Give One-Man Shows of Promise at Galleries Here." *New York Times,* May 26, 1956.

1957 *Mid-America Annual Exhibition,* Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Missouri, Spring.

Six Gallery, San Francisco, opened Nov. 10.

1958 *Seventy-Seventh Annual Painting and Sculpture Exhibition of the San Francisco Art Association,* San Francisco Museum of Art, Apr. 10–May 4. Catalogue.

Frankenstein, Alfred. "The Annual Displays the Grand Attack." *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle,* Apr. 20, 1958. • Fried, Alexander. "Current Exhibits: The Mature Potters versus the Freewheeling Painters." *San Francisco Examiner,* Apr. 20, 1958.

Twenty-Second Annual Drawing and Print Exhibition of the San Francisco Art Association, San Francisco Museum of Art, Dec. 4–28.

Beyond Painting: An Exhibition of Collages and Constructions, Alan Gallery, New York, Dec. 29, 1958–Jan. 24, 1959.

1959 Spatsa Gallery, San Francisco, Jan. 8–Feb. 8.

Paintings since 1945: A Collection in the Making, Lent by Richard Brown Baker, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Mar. 18–Apr. 19. Catalogue.

Seventy-Eighth Annual Painting and Sculpture Exhibition of the San Francisco Art Association, San Francisco Museum of Art, Apr. 2–May 3. Catalogue.

The Individual and His World, San Francisco Art Association Art Bank, California School of Fine Arts, San Francisco, Nov.–Dec. 5.

Cross, Miriam Dungan. "Shocking 'Beat' Art Displayed." *Oakland Tribune,* Nov. 29, 1959.

San Francisco Art Association Artist Members Show, M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, Dec. 18, 1959–Jan. 17, 1960.

Curtin, Andrew. "The Unliked 'Child': Art, or Grave-Robber's Nightmare?" *San Francisco News-Call Bulletin,* Jan. 14, 1960. • Fried, Alexander. "A Violent Exhibit: Gloom Preoccupies the Local Entrants in a de Young Show." *San Francisco Examiner,* Dec. 27, 1959. • ——. "Weird 'The Child': Sculptor Defines De Young Exhibit." *San Francisco Examiner,* Jan. 15, 1960. • Waite, Elmont. "That's Not Murder—That's Art." *San Francisco Chronicle,* Jan. 14, 1960.

1960 *Seventy-Ninth Annual Painting and Sculpture Exhibition of the San Francisco Art Association,* San Francisco Museum of Art, Mar. 24–Apr. 24.

Church Art Today, Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, Apr. 3–May 1.

Collage: Art in Scraps and Patchwork, Newark Museum, New Jersey, Apr. 28–June 12.

New Forms—New Media, Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, June 6–24. Catalogue.

Canaday, John. "Art: A Wild, but Curious, End-of-Season Treat." *New York Times,* June 7, 1960.

New Media—New Forms in Painting and Sculpture, Version II, Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, Sept. 28–Oct. 22.

3rd Annual Outdoor Show of West Coast Sculptors in the Gallery Garden, Eric Locke Galleries, San Francisco, Oct. 16–Nov. 30.

Daily Bread, General Assembly Meeting, National Council of Churches, San Francisco, Dec.

"Exhibit Made of Junk Wins Art Show Prize." *Los Angeles Times,* Dec. 12, 1960. • McNeur, Lynda. "Top Entry in 'Daily Bread' Show Makes Straight, Hard Statement." *General Assembly News,* Dec. 7, 1960. • ——. "Wordless Preaching." *Inter-Church News* 2, no. 4 (Dec. 1960–Jan. 1961): 4. • Murphy, George. "Nylons and Box—What Is It?" *San Francisco Examiner,* Dec. 6, 1960.

Gang Bang, Batman Gallery, San Francisco, Dec. 4, 1960–Jan. 1, 1961.

Coates, Robert M. "The Art Galleries." *New Yorker,* Jan. 30, 1960, 72–73.

1961 *Twenty-Fourth Annual Drawing, Print and Sculpture Exhibition of the San Francisco Art Association,* San Francisco Museum of Art, Feb. 2–Mar. 5.

Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture, Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Urbana, Feb. 26–Apr. 2. Catalogue.

The Art of Assemblage, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Oct. 2–Nov. 12. Traveled to Dallas Museum for Contemporary Arts, Jan. 9–Feb. 11, 1962; San Francisco Museum of Art, Mar. 5–Apr. 15, 1962. Catalogue.

Picard, Lil. "New Yorker Kunstbrief." *Das Kunstwerk* 5–6, no. 15 (Nov. 1961): 56, 62.

1962 *Increase in Riches: The Growth of the Museum's Collections, 1959–1961,* San Francisco Museum of Art, Jan. 10–Feb. 25.

Master—Bat, Batman Gallery, San Francisco, Feb. 22–Apr. 7.

Jarvis Rockwell, Bruce Conner, Batman Gallery, San Francisco, Mar.

Olmsted, Robert. "Jarvis Rockwell, Bruce Conner." *Artforum* 1, no. 1 (June 1962): 39. Reprinted in *Artforum* 26, no. 6 (Feb. 1988).

San Francisco Art Association Artist Members Show, M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, Mar. 17–Apr. 15.

Directions in Collage: California, Pasadena Art Museum, California, June 19–July 20.

The Construction as an Object of Illusion, San Francisco Art Institute, Sept. 4–21.

Leider, Philip. "The Construction as an Object of Illusion." *Artforum* 1, no. 5 (Sept. 1962): 40.

Tenth Anniversary Exhibition, Alan Gallery, New York, opened Sept. 24.

The Western American Experimental, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Oct. 8–11.

Fifty California Artists, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Oct. 23–Dec. 2. Organized by the San Francisco Museum of Art, with the assistance of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; traveled to Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Feb. 17–Mar. 17, 1963; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, Apr. 10–May 8, 1963; and Des Moines Art Center, May 24–June 23, 1963. Catalogue.

Bogat, Regina. "Fifty California Artists." *Artforum* 1, no. 7 (Jan. 1963): 25–26.

Some Points of View —'62, Stanford University Art Gallery, Palo Alto, California, Oct. 30–Nov. 20. Catalogue.

Polley, E. M. "Some Points of View—'62, Stanford University Art Gallery." *Artforum* 1, no. 7 (Dec. 1962): 41.

A Program of Films, Alan Gallery, New York, Dec. 2.

1963 *Sixty-Sixth Annual American Exhibition: Directions in Contemporary Painting and Sculpture,* Art Institute of Chicago, Jan. 11–Feb. 10. Catalogue.

New Work, Alan Gallery, New York, May 20–June 7.

IV Biennale internazionale d'arte: Oltre l'informale, Palazzo del Kursal, Republic of San Marino, July 7–Sept. 20. Catalogue.

"IV Biennale internazionale d'arte (San Marino)." *Art International* 7, no. 6 (June 1963): 51, 60.

Contemporary California Sculpture Show, Oakland Museum, Aug. 5–Sept. 15.

Coplans, John. "Sculpture in California." *Artforum* 2, no. 2 (Aug. 1963): 4–5.

Assemblage, Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, Jan. 31–Feb. 21. Organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York; traveled to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Mar. 7–28; Hackley Art Gallery, Muskegon, Michigan, Apr. 12–May 3; Indiana University, Bloomington, May 10–31; Isaac Delgado Museum of Art, New Orleans, Sept. 1–22; Tucson Art Center, Oct. 2–23; Washington University, Saint Louis, Nov. 4–25; San Francisco State College, Jan. 16–Feb. 6, 1964; University of Oregon, Eugene, Feb. 21–Mar. 14, 1964; University of South Florida, Tampa, May 7–28, 1964; Detroit Institute of Arts, June 12–July 3, 1964.

Fine Arts Auction of the San Francisco Art Institute: Preview Exhibition, California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, Sept. 11–19.

Directions: American Painting, San Francisco Museum of Art, Sept. 20–Oct. 20.

Annual Exhibition of Art—Contemporary American Painting, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Dec. 11, 1963–Feb. 2, 1964.

1964 *Eighty-Third Annual Exhibition of the San Francisco Art Institute,* San Francisco Museum of Art, Apr. 17–May 17. Catalogue.

Frankenstein, Alfred. "A Break with Art Tradition." *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle,* Apr. 26, 1964. • Fried, Alexander. "Silly Sideshow Antics on the Annual Exhibit's Stage." *San Francisco Examiner,* Apr. 26, 1964. • Monte, James. "Sculpture Steals the Show in the Eighty-Third Annual." *Artforum* 2, no. 11 (May 1964): 23–24. • Ventura, Anita. "San Francisco." *Arts* 39, no. 1 (Oct. 1964): 22–25.

Recent American Drawings, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, Apr. 19–May 17.

Selection 1964, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, May 16–June 14. Catalogue.

Bruce Conner, James Gill, Galleria George Lester, Rome, June 3–23. Catalogue.

Nieuwe Realisten, Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, June 24–Aug. 30. Catalogue. Traveled to Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, Vienna (as *Pop, etc.*), Sept. 19–Oct. 31, catalogue; Akademie der Künste, Berlin (as *Neue Realisten und Pop Art*), Nov. 20, 1964–Jan. 3, 1965, catalogue; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (as *Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme, etc. . . .*), Feb. 5–Mar. 1, 1965, catalogue.

1964 Annual Exhibition: Contemporary American Sculpture, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Dec. 9, 1964–Jan. 31, 1965. Catalogue.

1965 *The Drawing Society: Regional Exhibition,* California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, Feb. 27–Apr. 11.

Art of the 50's and 60's, Larry Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut, Apr. 25–July 5.

Paintings, Sculptures, Assemblages, Drawing, Alan Gallery, New York, June 1–July 2.

65 66, Alan Gallery, New York, Sept. 8–Oct. 10.

1966 *Los Angeles Now,* Robert Fraser Gallery, London, Jan. 13–Feb. 19. Catalogue.

A Century of American Art, 1866–1966: 100 Years of Visual Evolution, Scudder Gallery and Small Gallery, Paul Creative Arts Center, University of New Hampshire at Durham, Jan. 15–Feb. 15.

Contemporary American Sculpture: Selection 1, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Apr. 5–May 15. Catalogue.

Seven Decades, 1865–1965: Crosscurrents in Modern Art, Public Education Association, New York, Apr. 26–May 21.

Paintings, Sculptures, Drawings, Collages, Alan Gallery, New York, June 1–July 1.

1967 *Exchange Exhibition from the Collection of Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University,* Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Feb. 20–Mar. 26.

Nebraska Art Today: A Centennial Invitational Exhibition, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Mar. Catalogue.

Funk, University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, Apr. 18–May 29. Catalogue.

Frankenstein, Alfred. "A Confrontation with 'Funk.'" *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle,* Apr. 23, 1967. • Monte, James. "'Making It' with Funk." *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967): 56.

American Sculpture of the Sixties, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Apr. 28–June 25. Catalogue.

Selection 1967, University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, June 20–Sept. 10.

VI Biennale d'arte: Nuove techniche d'immagine, Republic of San Marino, July 15–Sept. 30. Catalogue.

Food Art, San Francisco Museum of Art, Sept. 20.

"Food Sculpture Exhibition Proves Delight to Audiences." *Wichita Beacon,* Sept. 21, 1967. • Polley, E. M. "The Wonderful Whirl of Art." *San Francisco Chronicle,* June 26, 1967. • Zane, Maitland. "An Art Exhibit for All Tastes." *San Francisco Chronicle,* Sept. 21, 1967.

Art on Paper Invitational '67: The Weatherspoon Annual Exhibition, Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, Oct. 15–Nov. 22.

1968 *Three Blind Mice: De collecties: Visser, Peeters, Becht,* Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands, Apr. 6–May 19. Traveled to Sint-Pietersabdij, Ghent, Belgium, June 15–Aug. 15. Catalogue.

The Obsessive Image, 1960–1968; The Opening Exhibition of the Institute of Contemporary Arts at Carlton House Terrace, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, Apr. 10–May 29. Catalogue.

IIe Biennale Internationale de l'affiche Varsovie, Zachęta, Warsaw, June. Catalogue.

San Francisco Film Scene, Light Sound Dimension, San Francisco, June 17–21.

SMS: A Collection of Original Multiples, Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne, Sept.

Assemblage in California: Works from the Late 50's and Early 60's, University of California, Irvine, Oct. 15–Nov. 24. Catalogue.

Illusionism in American Art, Landau-Alan Gallery, New York, Nov. 23–Dec. 24. Catalogue.

1969 *Cineprobe,* The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Feb. 20.

The Rose Art Museum Collection, Brandeis University at New Hampshire, Scudder Gallery, Paul Creative Arts Center, University of New Hampshire at Durham, Apr. 14–May 5.

Invisible Painting and Sculpture, Richmond Art Center, California, Apr. 24–June 1. Catalogue.

Human Concern/Personal Torment, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Oct. 14–Nov. 30. Traveled to University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, Jan. 20–Mar. 1, 1970. Catalogue.

A Memorial Exhibition: Selections from the Nathaniel Saltonstall Collection, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Nov. 11–Dec. 14.

Kompas 4/Westkunst U.S.A., Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands, Nov. 21, 1969–Jan. 4, 1970. Catalogue.

West Coast: 1945–1969, Pasadena Art Museum, California, Nov. 24, 1969–Jan. 18, 1970. Catalogue.

1970 *String and Rope,* Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, Jan. 7–31. Catalogue.

Kompass, Kunsthalle Bern, Apr. 9–May 18.

Excellence: Art from the University Community, University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, Sept.

1971 *The American Independent Film,* Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Apr. 13–June 8.

Alvin Light and Bruce Conner, San Francisco Art Institute, Apr. 29–May 29.

> Albright, Thomas. "Light and Conner: An Outstanding Exhibition." *San Francisco Chronicle,* May 4, 1971.

Fünf Sammler—Kunst unserer Zeit, Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal, Germany, June 5–July 11. Catalogue.

The Artist as Adversary, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 1–Sept. 27. Catalogue.

Contemporary American Art from Orange County Collections, Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California, Oct. 23–Nov. 14.

Tableaux d'aujourd'hui, Palais Galliera, Paris, opened Dec. 5. Brochure.

1972 *Family Show: Bob, Bruce, Jean Conner,* Quay Gallery, San Francisco, Jan. 4–22. Traveled to Jacqueline Anhalt Gallery, Los Angeles, Feb. 18–Mar. 9, 1973.

> Bloomfield, Arthur. "The Family That Makes Art Together." *San Francisco Examiner,* Jan. 16, 1972. • Frankenstein, Alfred. "A Conner Family Show." *San Francisco Chronicle,* Jan. 7, 1972.

Surrealism Is Alive and Well in the West, Baxter Art Gallery, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, Feb. 25–Apr. 14. Catalogue.

Crown Point Press, San Francisco Art Institute, Sept. 1–Oct. 1.

> Fried, Alexander. "Fine Prints from an East Bay Press." *San Francisco Examiner,* Sept. 5, 1972.

1974 *An Evening of Expanded Cinema,* Cirrus Editions, Los Angeles, Feb. 1.

Poets of the Cities: New York and San Francisco, 1950–1965, Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Nov. 20–Dec. 29. Traveled to San Francisco Museum of Art, Jan. 31–Mar. 23, 1975; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, Apr. 23–June 1, 1975. Catalogue.

> Albright, Thomas. "The Beats—More Than Nostalgia." *San Francisco Chronicle,* Feb. 1, 1975. • Berkman, Florence. "Poets of the Cities: New York and San Francisco." *Hartford Times,* Apr. 27, 1975. • Bloomfield, Arthur. "Artistic Tale of Two Cities a Decade Ago." *San Francisco Examiner,* Jan. 31, 1975. • Butterfield, Jan. "San Francisco." *Art Gallery,* Mar. 1975, 17, 58–59. • Dunham, Judith. "Poets of the Cities." *Artweek* 6, no. 9 (Mar. 1, 1975): 1–2. • Frankenstein, Alfred. "The Wonderful '50s—Artists and Poets." *San Francisco Chronicle,* Feb. 9, 1975. • Goldenthal, Jolene. "Sense of a Time Just Past." *Hartford Courant,* Apr. 27, 1975. • Haacke, Lorraine. "Conner at DMFA." *Dallas Times Herald,* Dec. 1, 1974. • Stiles, Kristine. "Bringing Back the Beat Generation." *Daily Californian,* Feb. 7, 1975.

1975 *California: A Drawing Show,* Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California, Jan. 26–Mar. 9. Catalogue.

> Wilson, William. "Double-Edged Message in 'A Drawing Show.'" *Los Angeles Times,* Feb. 16, 1975.

"A Kind of Beatness": Photographs of a North Beach Era, 1950–1965, Focus Gallery, San Francisco, Feb. 4–Mar. 1. Catalogue.

Selections from the American Print Collection, Mills College Art Gallery, Oakland, Feb. 16–Mar. 16.

Art as a Muscular Principle, John and Norah Warbeke Gallery, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, Massachusetts, Feb. 28–Mar. 20. Catalogue.

Collage and Assemblage Exhibition, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, Mar. 29–May 23.

Word Works Two, San Jose State University, California, Apr. 14–May 16.

Menace, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, May 2–June 22. Catalogue.

Film as Art 1975, American Film Festival, Carnegie Hall Cinema, New York, June.

> Egan, Catherine. "Film as Metamorphosis: Reflections on EFLA's Film as Art Program." *Sight Lines* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1975): 11–12.

Contemporary Sculpture from the Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, Sept. 9–Oct. 12.

Sculpture: American Directions, 1945–1975, National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Oct. 3–Nov. 30. Catalogue.

Environment and the New Art: 1960–1975, Memorial Union Art Gallery, University of California, Davis, Nov. 12–Dec. 18.

Philip McCracken, Bruce Conner, Madeleine Mailand, Henry Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, Nov. 20, 1975–Jan. 4, 1976.

> Campbell, R. M. "A Diverse Three-Solo Exhibit at the Henry." *Seattle Post-Intelligencer,* Dec. 7, 1975.

1976 *Sculpture: American Directions, 1945–1975,* Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Jan. 20–Feb. 9.

Une histoire du cinéma, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, Jan.–Mar. Catalogue.

The Last Time I Saw Ferus, 1957–1966, Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California, Mar. 17–Apr. 17. Catalogue.

> Askey, Ruth. "The Ferus Gallery Remembered." *Artweek* 7, no. 14 (Apr. 3, 1976): 5. • Wilson, William. "A Ferus Wheel of Fortune." *Los Angeles Times,* Mar. 22, 1976.

The Great Egg Sale, Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California, Apr. 1–12.

Hybrid Vigor: Jack Fulton, Bruce Conner, Robert Heinecken, Oakland Museum, Apr. 13–June 13.

> Murray, Joan. "Hybrid Vigor." *Artweek* 7, no. 18 (May 1, 1976): 15.

A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema, traveling exhibition organized by the American Federation of the Arts, New York, opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 1976. Catalogue.

Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Sept. 3–Nov. 21. Traveled to the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, May 20–Sept. 11, 1977. Catalogue.

> Albright, Thomas. "California Art since the 'Modern Dawn.'" *Art News* 76, no. 1 (Jan. 1977): 68–72.

New American Filmmakers Series: Bruce Conner, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Oct. 12–17.

> Van Gelder, Lawrence. "Bruce Conner Films at Whitney." *New York Times,* Oct. 13, 1976.

New Work: Bruce Conner and Manuel Neri, Braunstein/Quay Gallery, San Francisco, Nov. 2–27.

> Albright, Thomas. "The Cream of the Shows." *San Francisco Chronicle,* Nov. 11, 1976. • ———. "Slouching Mortality and Inky Galaxies." *Art News* 76, no. 1 (Jan. 1977): 90.

1977 *Recent Acquisitions,* Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Feb. 4–27.

Improbable Furniture, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Mar. 10–Apr. 10. Traveled to La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, California, May 20–July 6. Catalogue.

Film as Art 1977, 19th Annual American Film Festival, New York, May.

Paris/New York, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, June 1–Sept. 19. Catalogue.

Perceptions of the Spirit in Twentieth-Century American Art, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Sept. 20–Nov. 27. Traveled to University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, Dec. 20, 1977–Feb. 12, 1978; Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute, San Antonio, Apr. 16–29, 1978; Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio, May 10–June 19, 1978. Catalogue.

> Shere, Charles. "The Soul Sees What the Spirit Stalks." *Oakland Tribune,* Dec. 25, 1977.

From the American Collection, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Sept. 30–Dec. 5.

1978 *Three Generations,* Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, Jan. 26–Mar. 4.

Fourth Triennale-India, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, Feb. Catalogue.

Aspekte der 60er Jahre: Aus der Sammlung Reinhard Onnasch, Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Feb. 2–Apr. 23. Catalogue.

1979 *1979 Biennial Exhibition,* Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Feb. 6–Apr. 8. Catalogue.

American Independent Film: Film and Filmmakers, Moore College of Art, Philadelphia, Feb. 28.

Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film, 1910–1975, Hayward Gallery, Arts Council of Great Britain, London, May 3–June 17.

American Portraits of the Sixties and Seventies, Aspen Center for the Visual Arts, June 16–Aug. Catalogue.

The American Still Life, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, Oct. 26–Dec. 12.

1980 *"The Pleasure Dome": Amerikansk Experimentfilm, 1939–1979,* Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Feb. 16–Apr. 4. Catalogue.

Paradox of Progress: Collage and Assemblage in the Permanent Collection, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Apr. 22–July 22.

The Figurative Tradition and the Whitney Museum of American Art: Paintings and Sculpture from the Permanent Collection, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, June 25–Sept. 28. Catalogue.

Fifth SECA Film as Art Awards, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, May 14.

1981 *Home Made Movies: 20 Years of American 8mm and Super-8 Films,* Anthology Film Archives, New York, May 1–June 30.

Cinema independente americano e francese, Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea – Cinecteca Italiana de Milano, Milan, September. Brochure.

1982 *The Americans: The Collage,* Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, July 11–Oct. 3. Catalogue.

Resource/Reservoir: Collage and Assemblage, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, July 30–Sept. 26. Catalogue.

100 Years of California Sculpture, Oakland Museum, Aug. 7–Oct. 17. Catalogue.

Northern California Art of the Sixties, de Saisset Museum, University of Santa Clara, California, Oct. 12–Dec. 12. Catalogue.

Burckhardt, Dorothy. "The 60s Art Experience." *San Jose Mercury News,* Oct. 17, 1982.

Form, Freud and Feeling, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Sept. 17, 1982–Jan. 10, 1983.

1983 *Abstract Painting, 1960–69,* Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Long Island City, New York, Jan. 16–Mar. 13.

1983 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Mar. 15–May 29. Catalogue.

Bay Area Collects, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Apr. 21–June 26.

Sight/Vision: The Urban Milieu (Number One), Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, Oct. 5–Nov. 5.

Albright, Thomas. "The Beat Artists Revisited." *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle and Examiner,* Oct. 23, 1983. • Van Proyen, Mark. "Sight/Vision: The Inward Gaze." *Artweek,* Oct. 29, 1983.

1984 *The Folding Image: Screens by Western Artists of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,* National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Mar. 4–Sept. 3. Co-organized with and traveled to Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, Oct. 11, 1984–Jan. 6, 1985. Catalogue.

Lewis, Jo Ann. "Unfolding Images." *Washington Post,* Mar. 4, 1984.

The Becht Collection: Visual Art from The Agnes and Frits Becht Collection, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Mar. 16–May 6.

Sixth SECA Film as Art Award Winners, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, May 31–June 17.

A Focus on California, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, July 7–Sept. 9.

"Primitivism" in 20th-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Sept. 27, 1984–Jan. 15, 1985. Traveled to Detroit Institute of Arts, Feb. 27–May 19, 1985; Dallas Museum of Arts, June 23–Sept. 1, 1985. Catalogue.

1985 *Extending the Perimeters of Twentieth-Century Photography,* San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Aug. 2–Oct. 6. Catalogue.

Palmer, Rebecca. "A Range of Experimentation." *Artweek* 16, no. 29 (Sept. 7, 1985): 13.

Actual Size: An Exhibition of Small Paintings and Sculptures, Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles, Sept. 24–Oct. 16.

Barbara Toll Fine Arts, New York, Dec. 6, 1985–Jan. 10, 1986.

1986 *Sight/Vision: The Urban Milieu (Number Two),* Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, Aug. 13–Sept. 13.

Baker, Kenneth. "Uncompromising Beat Era Artists Still Going Strong." *San Francisco Chronicle,* Aug. 29, 1986. • Shere, Charles. "Old Masters of Beat Span Generations." *Oakland Tribune,* Aug. 19, 1986. • Solnit, Rebecca. "Icons and Iconoclasts." *Artweek* 17, no. 29 (Sept. 6, 1986): 5.

Seven Artists in Depth: The Creative Process, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Aug. 7–Oct. 5.

Baker, Kenneth. "Seven for a Swan Song." *San Francisco Chronicle,* Aug. 17, 1986.

Die 60er Jahre: Kölns Weg zum Kunstmetropole, vom Happening zum Kunstmarkt, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, Aug. 31–Nov. 16.

Europa/Amerika: Die Geschichte einer künstlerischen Faszination seit 1940, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Sept. 6–Nov. 30. Catalogue.

Rose Art Museum, Selected 20th-Century Paintings, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, Oct. 28–Nov. 2.

1987 *Made in U.S.A.: An Americanization in Modern Art, The '50s and '60s,* University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, Apr. 4–June 21. Traveled to Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, July 25–Sept. 6; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Oct. 7–Dec. 7. Catalogue.

Baker, Kenneth. "The Triumph of Pop Art." *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle,* Apr. 12, 1987. • Berkson, Bill, "Made in USA." *Artforum* 26, no. 2 (Oct. 1987): 145–47. • Burckhardt, Dorothy. "Pop Went the Easel." *San Jose Mercury News,* Mar. 29, 1987.

Photography and Art: Interactions since 1946, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, June 4–Aug. 30. Co-organized with and traveled to Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Oct. 15, 1987–Jan. 24, 1988; traveled to Queens Museum, New York, Feb. 13–Apr. 3, 1988; Des Moines Art Center, May 6–June 2, 1988. Catalogue.

1988 *Different Drummers,* Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, May 12–Aug. 14. Catalogue.

Rubenfeld, Florence. "Different Drummers." *Arts* 63, no. 3 (Nov. 1988): 121.

Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art, James Corcoran Gallery, Santa Monica, July 16–Sept. 7. Catalogue.

Selwyn, Marc. "Lost and Found in California." *Flash Art* 143 (Nov.–Dec. 1988): 76–79. • Solnit, Rebecca. "Orders and Questions." *Artweek* 19, no. 28 (Aug. 20, 1988): 1.

1989 *Forty Years of California Assemblage,* Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, Apr. 4–May 21. Traveled to San Jose Museum of Art, California, June 9–Aug. 13; Fresno Art Museum, California, Sept. 8–Nov. 12; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Dec. 15, 1989–Feb. 4, 1990. Catalogue.

Baker, Kenneth. "Fragments of Modern Experience." *San Francisco Chronicle,* Aug. 6, 1989. • Gerstler, Amy. "Forty Years of California Assemblage." *Art Issues,* no. 6 (Sept.–Oct. 1989): 24. • Marks, Ben. "The Poetics of Assemblage." *Artweek* 20, no. 18 (May 6, 1989): 1.

The "Junk" Aesthetic: Assemblage of the 1950s and Early 1960s, Whitney Museum of American Art, Fairfield County, Stamford, Connecticut, Apr. 7–June 14. Traveled to Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center, New York, June 30–Aug. 23. Catalogue.

S.M.S., Didier Lecointre et Denis Ozanne, Paris, Apr. 25–May 27. Catalogue.

First Impressions: Early Prints by Forty-Six Contemporary Artists, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, June 4–Sept. 10. Traveled to Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, Dec. 2, 1989–Jan. 21, 1990; Baltimore Museum of Art, Feb. 25–Jan. 21, 1990; Neuberger Museum, State University of New York, Purchase, June 4–Sept. 16, 1990. Catalogue.

Image World: Art and Media Culture, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Nov. 8, 1989–Feb. 18, 1990. Catalogue.

1990 *Lyrical Vision: The Six Gallery, 1954–1957,* Natsoulas/Novelozo Gallery, Davis, California, Jan. 12–Feb. 28. Catalogue.

1991 *The Spatsa Gallery: 1958–1961,* Natsoulas/Novelozo Gallery, Davis, California, Jan. 11–Feb. 3. Catalogue.

Dalkey, Victoria. "Looking Back at Bold Views of Future." *Sacramento Bee,* Jan. 27, 1991. • Nixon, Bruce A. "The Spatsa Gallery." *Art of California,* Jan. 1991, 43–45.

Wallace Berman, Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, George Herms, Jess: Assemblage, Collage, Film, Video, Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, Mar. 1–30.

1992 *Works on Paper,* Curt Marcus Gallery, New York, Jan. 4–29.

Looking Out, Looking In: Selections of Bay Area Drawing, Richmond Art Center, California, Feb. 25–Apr. 12.

Sight/Vision: The Urban Milieu (Number Three), Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, June 9–July 9.

Bonetti, David. "Metaphors for the Human Spirit." *San Francisco Examiner,* June 17, 1992.

American Drawings since 1970: Selections from the Permanent Collection, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Oct. 1, 1992–Jan. 3, 1993.

Volumination: The Book as Object, Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas, Oct. 23–Dec. 18.

Conversations—About Magic About Structure: Bruce Conner, Tony DeLap, John McLaughlin, Robert C. Morgan, Jan Turner Gallery, Los Angeles, Nov. 21, 1992–Jan. 30, 1993.

Beller, Miles. "Talking Heads." *Artweek* 24, no. 2 (Jan. 21, 1993): 22–23. • Kandel, Susan. "Review: Bruce Conner." *Los Angeles Times,* Dec. 23, 1993.

1993 *Collage,* Brian Gross Fine Art, San Francisco, May 6–June 19.

Abject Art, Repulsion and Desire in American Art: Selections from the Permanent Collection, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, June 23–Aug. 29. Catalogue.

The Contemporary Artist's Book: The Book as Art, 871 Fine Arts, San Francisco, Sept. 9–Dec. 24.

Photographic: Works of the Sixties and Seventies, Zabriskie Gallery, New York, Sept. 22–Oct. 30.

Goldberg, Vicki. "From Back Door to Inner Sanctum in the House of Art." *New York Times,* Oct. 24, 1993.

Four Centuries of Drawing: 1593–1993, Kohn Abrams Gallery, Los Angeles, Oct. 16–Nov. 12.

1994 *Experimental Vision: The Evolution of the Photogram since 1919,* Denver Art Museum, Jan. 15–Mar. 27. Catalogue.

Here and Now: Bay Area Masterworks from the di Rosa Collection, Oakland Museum, Mar. 11–May 8.

1995 *Sight/Vision: The Urban Milieu (Number Four),* Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, Jan. 5–Feb. 4.

Drawings Selected by Paul Cummings, The Century Association, New York, Jan. 17–Feb. 10.

1968 SMS, I. C. Editions, New York, Jan. 19–Feb. 25.

Sculpture as Objects: 1915–1995, Curt Marcus Gallery, New York, Apr. 28–May 27.

Collage: Made in America, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, June 8–Aug. 25.

Impressions of Nature, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Sept. 16, 1995–Jan. 2, 1996.

A Bay Area Connection: Works from the Anderson Collection, 1954–1984, Triton Museum of Art, Santa Clara, California, Nov. 1, 1995–Jan. 28, 1996.

Beat Culture and the New America, 1950–1965, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Nov. 9, 1995–Feb. 4, 1996. Traveled to Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, June 2–Sept. 15, 1996; M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, Oct. 5–Dec. 29, 1996. Catalogue.

> Bonetti, David. "Beat." *San Francisco Examiner,* Oct. 4, 1996. • Holt, Patricia. "The Beats Go On." *San Francisco Chronicle,* Oct. 4, 1996. • Kimmelman, Michael. "At the Whitney, a Celebration of Beat Culture (Sandals and All)." *New York Times,* Nov. 10, 1995. • Metzgar, Joseph. "Keeping the Beats." *SF Live,* Oct. 1996: 8–9. • Morgan, Susan. "On the Road Again; Beat Culture Is Revisited in an Exhibit at the Whitney Museum." *Los Angeles Times,* Nov. 9, 1995. • Ratcliff, Carter. "And the Beats Go On." *Art in America* 84, no. 3 (Mar. 1996): 62–67. • Schjeldahl, Peter. "Beat and Rebeat." *Village Voice,* Nov. 21, 1995. • Siegel, Lee. "Beat Culture and the New America." *Art News* 95, no. 2 (Feb. 1996): 133. • Stevens, Mark. "On the Road Again." *New York Magazine,* Nov. 27, 1995, 82, 96.

Blockheads, Café ?, San Francisco, Dec. 3–30.

1996 *The Rational World,* Kohn Turner Gallery, Los Angeles, Jan. 13–Feb. 10.

> Kandel, Susan. "Their Own World." *Los Angeles Times,* Jan. 25, 1996.

Hall of Mirrors: Art and Film since 1945, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Mar. 17–July 28. Traveled to Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Sept. 21, 1996–Jan. 5, 1997; Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, June–Sept. 1997; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Oct. 11, 1997–Jan. 21, 1998. Catalogue.

> Knight, Christopher. "A Fun House 'Mirror.'" *Los Angeles Times,* Mar. 19, 1996. • McKenna, Kristine. "Projections and Reflections." *Los Angeles Times,* Mar. 17, 1996. • Smith, Roberta. "Art, Film, and Their Brilliant, Messy Union." *New York Times,* Apr. 7, 1996.

In Pursuit of the Invisible: Selections from the Collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin, Richmond Arts Center, Loomis Chaffee School, Windsor, Connecticut, May 20–June 15. Catalogue.

Bruce Conner, Dennis Hopper, Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, Oct. 3–Nov. 9.

> La Salle, Mick. "Dennis Hopper's Artier Side." *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle,* Sept. 29, 1996.

1997 Curt Marcus Gallery, New York, Jan. 4–Feb. 1.

Medij v mediju/Media in Media, Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Ljubljana, Slovenia, Jan. 9–30. Catalogue.

Collage and Assemblage, Manny Silverman Gallery, Los Angeles, Mar. 6–Apr. 26.

Bruce Conner and Barbara Ess, Curt Marcus Gallery, New York, Mar. 14–Apr. 26.

1997 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Mar. 20–June 15. Catalogue.

> Adams, Brooks. "Turtle Derby." *Art in America* 85, no. 6 (June 1997): 35–40. • Baker, Kenneth. "Sounding Out the Logic Behind Whitney Biennial." *San Francisco Chronicle,* Mar. 21, 1997. • Kimmelman, Michael. "Biennial Narratives Snagged on the Cutting Edge." *New York Times,* Mar. 21, 1997. • Knight, Christopher. "Show Time at Biennial: Send in the Big Crowds." *Los Angeles Times,* Mar. 21, 1997. • McCormick, Carlo. "Biennial Best." *Paper,* Mar. 1997, 63. • McKenna, Kristine. "It Happens Every Two Years." *Los Angeles Times,* Mar. 9, 1997. • "Others on Stage at the Whitney Show." *New York Times,* Mar. 9, 1997. • Smith, Richard. "West Coast at the Whitney." *Artweek* 28, no. 5 (May 1997): 12. • Wakefield, Neville. "Three to Watch." *Elle Decor* 56 (Dec. 1997–Jan. 1998): 62, 68, 70.

Thirty-Five Years at Crown Point Press: Making Prints, Doing Art, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, June 8–Sept. 1. Traveled to California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, Oct. 4, 1997–Jan. 4, 1998. Catalogue.

Scene of the Crime, Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, University of California, Los Angeles, July 23–Oct. 5.

The Pop 60's: Transatlantic Crossing, Centro Cultural de Belém, Brazil, Sept. 11–Nov. 17.

Search and Destroy: Punk Photography 1976–1979, The Lab, San Francisco, Sept. 12–Oct. 11.

Light Catchers, Bennington College, Vermont, Sept. 24–Oct. 24.

Thirty-Third Annual Exhibition of Art on Paper, Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, Nov. 16, 1997–Jan. 18, 1998.

1998 *Original Scale,* Apex Art, New York, Jan. 8–Feb. 7.

Small Scale Show, University Art Gallery, California State University, Hayward, Jan. 20–Feb. 12.

Growing Obsession, Dorsky Gallery, New York, Jan. 20–Feb. 28. Catalogue.

The Art of Collaborative Printmaking: Smith Andersen Editions, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, Aug. 13–Oct. 4. Traveled to de Saisset Museum, Santa Clara University, California, Aug. 24–Dec. 3, 1999. Catalogue.

Leaf, Spine, Word, Sign—Artist Books, Kunstmuseum Bonn, Germany, Oct. 29, 1998–Jan. 3, 1999. Traveled to Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe, Germany, Feb. 12–Apr. 29, 1999.

1999 *Highlights from the Collection,* Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, California, Feb. 6–May 9.

Alchemies of the Sixties, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, Sept. 7–Oct. 17.

2000 *The New Frontier: Art and Television, 1960–65,* Austin Museum of Art, Sept. 1–Nov. 26. Catalogue.

Celebrating Modern Art: The Anderson Collection, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Oct. 7, 2000–Jan. 15, 2001. Catalogue.

Made in California: Art, Image and Identity, 1900–2000, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Oct. 22, 2000–Mar. 18, 2001. Catalogue.

2001 *Obsessions,* University Art Gallery, University of California, San Diego, Jan. 19–Mar. 23.

Les années Pop, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, Mar. 15–Aug. 7. Catalogue.

> Berrebi, Sophie. "Les années Pop." *Frieze,* no. 60 (June–Aug. 2001).

2002 *Sunday Afternoon,* 303 Gallery, New York, May 30–July 19.

My Marilyn, Liljevalchs Konsthall, Stockholm, June 15–Aug. 18. Catalogue.

Ferus, Gagosian Gallery, New York, Sept. 12–Oct. 19. Catalogue.

Unknown Quantity, Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, Paris, Nov. 29, 2002–Mar. 30, 2003. Catalogue.

> Morel, Philippe-Marie. "Ce qui arrive: Fondation Cartier." *Art Press,* no. 287 (Feb. 2003): 80–81. • Cohen, Deborah. "Unknown Quantity." *British Medical Journal* 326, no. 7387 (Mar. 1, 2003): 505.

2003 *Cut, Copy, Paste: The Art of Contemporary Collage,* de Saisset Museum, Santa Clara University, California, May 3–Aug. 3.

Site and Insight: An Assemblage of Artists, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, June 29–Sept. 22.

The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960–1982, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Oct. 12, 2003–Jan. 4, 2004. Traveled to Hammer Museum, University of California, Los Angeles, Feb. 8–May 9, 2004; Museo de Arte Contemporánea de Vigo, Spain, May 28–Sept. 19, 2004; Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland, Nov. 27, 2004–Feb. 20, 2005; Art Central, Miami, Mar. 11–June 12, 2005. Catalogue.

> El-Sheikh, Tammer. "The Last Picture Show: Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland." *Canadian Art* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 84.

2004 *The Big Nothing,* Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, May 1–Aug. 20.

2005 *Emily Feather and Saul Fletcher,* Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, Apr. 16–May 21.

Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era, Tate Gallery, Liverpool, May 27–Sept. 25. Catalogue.

Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and His Circle, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Sept. 17–Nov. 26. Traveled to Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University, Logan, Jan. 10–Mar. 15, 2006; Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Kansas, Apr. 21–July 9, 2006; University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Oct. 17–Dec. 10, 2006; Grey Art Gallery, New York University, Jan. 16–Mar. 31, 2007. Catalogue.

KunstFilmBiennale Köln, Cologne, Oct. 19–24.

Cut, The Approach, London, Nov. 24, 2005–Jan. 29, 2006.

Thank You for the Music, Sprüth Magers, Munich, Nov. 24, 2005–Feb. 11, 2006.

2006 *Rough Trade,* Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, Mar. 18–Apr. 22.

4th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art: Von Mäusen und Menschen/Of Mice and Men, Mar. 25–June 5. Catalogue.

Good Vibrations: Visual Arts and Rock Culture, Palazzo delle Papesse Centro Arte Contemporanea, Siena, Italy, May 26–Sept. 24. Catalogue.

The Expanded Eye: Stalking the Unseen, Kunsthaus Zürich, June 16–Sept. 3. Catalogue.

Höhepunkte der KunstFilmBiennale Köln, Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, Sept. 24–Oct. 4.

In the Poem about Love You Don't Write the Word Love, Artists Space, New York, Nov. 16– Dec. 22.

2007 *36th International Film Festival,* Rotterdam, Jan. 24–Feb. 4.

Kunst und Film 1: Touching Politics, Kino Kunstmuseum, Bern, Mar. 9–12.

Seestücke: Von Max Beckmann bis Gerhard Richter, Kunsthalle Hamburg, June 8–Sept. 16.

The Third Mind: Carte blanche à Ugo Rondinone, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, Sept. 27, 2007–Jan. 3, 2008. Catalogue.

> Stonard, John-Paul. "The Third Mind." *Artforum* 46, no. 7 (Mar. 2008): 373.

Be-Bomb: The Transatlantic War of Images and All That Jazz, 1946–1956, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Oct. 5, 2007–Jan. 7, 2008. Co-organized with Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. Catalogue.

> Rich, Sarah K. "Be-Bomb: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona." *Artforum* 46, no. 7 (Mar. 2008): 350–52.

Apocalypse Now: The Theater of War, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, Nov. 30, 2007–Jan. 26, 2008.

> Decter, Joshua. "Apocalypse Now: The Theater of War." *Artforum* 46, no. 6 (Feb. 2008): 296.

2008 *Traces du sacré,* Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, May 7–Aug. 11. Co-organized with and traveled to Haus der Kunst, Munich (as *Spuren des Geistigen*), Sept. 19, 2008–Jan. 11, 2009. Catalogue.

Pacific Light: A Survey of California Watercolour, 1908–2008, Nordiska Akvarellmuseet, Skärhamn, Sweden, May 18–Sept. 14. Catalogue.

Forgotten Bar Project/July 2008, Galerie im Regierungsviertel, Berlin, July 1–31.

Views from the Avant-Garde, New York Film Festival, Sept. 26–Oct. 12.

Rock My Religion, Domus Artium 2002, Salamanca, Spain, Oct. 10, 2008–Jan. 4, 2009.

Looking for Mushrooms: Beat Poets, Hippies, Funk, Minimal Art, San Francisco 1955–1968, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Nov. 8, 2008–Mar. 1, 2009. Catalogue.

Deuter, Ulrich. "Achtung vor Pilzen!" *K.West* 12 (Dec. 2008). • Kohler, Michael. "Auf der Spur des magischen Pilzes." *Art* 11 (2008): 78. • "Spaltpilz: Pionier des 'Found Footage': Zum Tod von Bruce Conner." *Süddeutsche Zeitung,* Oct. 30, 2008. • Wach, Alexandra. "Blumenkinder und Pilz-Rebellen." *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* 262 (2008).

A Tribute to Bruce Conner and Terry Fox, Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, Dec. 3, 2008–Jan. 3, 2009.

GSK Contemporary, Part II: Collision Course, Royal Academy of Arts, London, Dec. 16, 2008–Jan. 19, 2009.

2009 *Built to Survive the Real World,* Andrew Roth, New York, Jan. 15–Mar. 14.

38th International Film Festival, Rotterdam, Jan. 21–Feb. 1.

Source Codes, Sprüth Magers, Berlin, June 26–Aug. 29.

James, Sarah. "Source Codes." *Art Monthly* 329 (2009): 28–29.

Life Forms, Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm, Sept. 16, 2009–Jan. 10, 2010.

Screening Real: Conner, Lockhart, Warhol, Kunsthaus Graz, Austria, Sept. 26, 2009–Jan. 10, 2010. Catalogue.

Metamorphosis Victorianus: Modern Collage, Victorian Engravings and Nostalgia, Ubu Gallery, New York, Oct. 30, 2009–Jan. 30, 2010.

Oisteanu, Valery. "Metamorphosis Victorianus." *Brooklyn Rail,* Dec. 11, 2009.

Artissima 16: Internazionale d'Arte Contemporanea a Torino, Turin, Italy, Nov. 6–8.

Spectacular Times: The 60s—The Moderna Museet Collection, Moderna Museet, Malmö, Sweden, Dec. 26, 2009–Feb. 27, 2011.

2010 *Collecting Biennials,* Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Jan. 16–Nov. 28.

Telling Stories, Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna, Feb. 5–Mar. 6.

AV Festival 10: Energy, AV Festival, Newcastle, England, Mar. 5–14.

Bilder in Bewegung: Künstler und Video/Film 1958–2010, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, May 29–Oct. 31. Catalogue.

I Am a Cliché, échos de l'esthétique punk, part of *Du lourd et du piquant/Heavy Duty and Razor Sharp,* Les Rencontres d'Arles Photographie 2010, France, July 3–Sept. 19. Catalogue.

Dennis Hopper and Bruce Conner: The Nonconformists, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Aug. 5.

Sunless (Journeys in Alta California since 1933), Thomas Dane Gallery, London, Sept. 2–Oct. 2.

25th Anniversary Show 1985–2010, Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, Nov. 20, 2010–Jan. 6, 2011.

Looking Back / The Fifth White Columns Annual, White Columns, New York, Dec. 11, 2010–Jan. 29, 2011.

2011 *Drawn/Taped/Burned: Abstraction on Paper,* Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, New York, Jan. 23–May 1.

Gold, Sylviane. "Sublime Notions from a Species that Likes to Doodle." *New York Times,* Feb. 18, 2011. • Wei, Lilly. "Drawn/Taped/Burned." *Artnews* 110, no. 5 (2011): 116.

Imagine Being Here Now, The 6th Momentum Biennial, Moss, Norway, June 18–Oct. 2. Catalogue.

CIRCA SIXTY: Bruce Conner and Jean Conner 1958 to 1964, Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, Nov. 11, 2011–Jan. 4, 2012.

2012 *CIRCUS WOLS: Eine Hommage,* Weserburg Museum of Modern Art, Bremen, Germany, Feb. 25–May 28. Catalogue.

Found Footage: Cinema Exposed, EYE Film Institute Netherlands, Amsterdam, Apr. 5–June 3.

Interruption: A Break in the Continuity of the Interstitial Space, Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, July 14–Aug. 25.

Mizota, Sharon. "Spare Works Aim to Fill in the Gaps." *Los Angeles Times,* Aug. 18, 2012.

Sound, Image, Object: The Intersection of Art and Music, University Art Gallery, Sonoma State University, Sept. 13–Oct. 14, 2012.

Carte Blanche to Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, Galerie Patrick Seguin, Paris, Oct. 19–Nov. 24.

Into the Mystic, Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, Nov. 17, 2012–Jan. 26, 2013.

2013 *Répétition: 1960–1975,* Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, Jan. 19–Feb. 9.

Wolken: Bilder zwischen Himmel und Erde, Leopold Museum, Vienna, Mar. 22–July 1. Catalogue.

Rhythm in It: Vom Rhythmus in der Gegenwartskunst, Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau, Switzerland, May 18–Aug. 11. Catalogue.

Specific Objects, Susan Inglett Gallery, New York, June 20–July 26.

Smith, Roberta. "Specific Objects." *New York Times,* July 5, 2013.

Damage Control: Art and Destruction since 1950, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Oct. 24, 2013–May 26, 2014. Traveled to Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg, July 12–Oct. 12, 2014; Kunsthaus Graz, Austria, Nov. 14, 2014–Feb. 15, 2015. Catalogue.

Woodward, Richard B. "Creative Destruction." *Wall Street Journal,* Jan. 8, 2014.

Biographical Forms: Construction and Individual Mythology, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Nov. 27, 2013–Mar. 31, 2014. Brochure.

2014 *Boursier-Mougenot, Conner, Echakhch, Gaines, Marclay, Oldenburg/van Bruggen,* Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, Apr. 26–July 16.

Unstable Places: New in Contemporary Art, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, June 2, 2014–Jan. 3, 2015.

Yahav, Galia. "Armageddon at the Israel Museum." *Haaretz,* Sept. 4, 2014.

Rauschenberg: Collecting and Connecting, Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, Aug. 28, 2014–Jan. 11, 2015. Catalogue.

Vitiello, Chris. "Rauschenberg Recombined: With Bruce Conner and Various Nasher Holdings." *Indy Week,* Aug. 20, 2014.

Ordinary Freaks: The Principle of Coolness in Pop Culture, Theatre and Museum, Künstlerhaus, Halle für Kunst und Medien, Graz, Austria, Sept. 28–Nov. 20. Brochure.

2015 *Cine Virus,* REDCAT, Los Angeles, Feb. 2.

The Triumph of Love: Beth Rudin DeWoody Collects, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida, Feb. 8–May 3.

Embracing Modernism: Ten Years of Drawings Acquisitions, The Morgan Library and Museum, New York, Feb. 13–May 25.

YES! Glue: A Half-Century of Collage by Bruce and Jean Conner, American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, Washington, DC, Apr. 4–May 24. Traveled to University Art Gallery, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, California, Feb. 18–Mar. 13, 2016.

Jenkins, Mark. "How Are These Things Not Like the Others?" *Washington Post,* May 9, 2015.

Left Coast: California Political Art, Center for the Humanities and James Gallery, Graduate Center, City University of New York, Apr. 15–May 30.

America Is Hard to See, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, May 1–Sept. 27.

A Brief History of Humankind, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, May 1–Jan. 2, 2016.

Kershner, Isabel. "To Celebrate 50 Years, the Israel Museum Looks Back Much Further." *New York Times,* June 17, 2015.

EC: Conner/Conrad, Anthology Film Archives, New York, May 3.

"RETROSPECTIVE" – Paule Anglim (1923–2015), Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, May 7–June 27.

Under the Clouds: From Paranoia to the Digital Sublime, Serralves Museu de Arte Contemporânea, Porto, Portugal, June 20–Sept. 9.

Sunscreen 2, The Power Station, Dallas, Texas, June 27.

Camera Atomica, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, July 8–Nov. 15. Catalogue.

Adams, James. "Head in the Mushroom Clouds: A New Exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario Surveys the Atomic Age." *The Globe and Mail,* July 11, 2015.

Bruce Conner and Ed Ruscha: Smoke and Mirrors, Senior & Shopmaker Gallery, New York, Oct. 1–Nov. 25, 2015. Brochure.

Smith, Roberta. "Bruce Conner and Ed Ruscha: Smoke and Mirrors." *New York Times,* Nov. 13, 2015.

TELE-Gen: Kunst und Fernsehen, Kunstmuseum Bonn, Germany, Oct. 1, 2015–Jan. 17, 2016.

All Film, All the Time, at Lunch Time, San Francisco Art Institute, Oct. 8 and Nov. 12.

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Front cover: Bruce Conner, photographed in (left, top to bottom) the 1950s, ca. 1972, 1986, and May 11, 1995; (center, top to bottom) ca. 2000, 1979, ca. 1972, and 1979; and (right, top to bottom) 1985, 1962, 1936, and 1986

Back cover: Bruce Conner, photographed ca. 2000

Page 4: LAST DRAWING, 1976–80 (pl. 123, detail)

AFTERWORD

Will Brown

"It was the morning after Bruce died. The doorbell rang. I was surprised to see the UPS man who had been delivering in our neighborhood for many years with a large box. I couldn't think. What could it be? Then I realized from the label that it must have been more brass handles.

I keep thinking now about how flustered I was that morning. When he said he had a package for Bruce I just blurted out, "Bruce is dead!" He was pretty startled and said he was sorry to hear that.

I told him I didn't want the package, I didn't know what to do with more brass handles. He said it was alright, he would just send them back. And that's what he did."

—Jean Conner

Bruce Conner's mobility was severely limited for the last five years of his life, when he rarely left the Glen Park home he shared with his wife, Jean. To aid in his physical navigation of its spaces, he worked with assistants to install a succession of identical, solid brass handles in each and every room—at once physical and metaphysical, fragmentary and elusive, elegant and anonymous. Together, they draft the ghost architecture of Conner's final years, transforming the pedestrian into something altogether different. The don't adorn; they reflect.





